Kindred

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by jxkuzure

Summary

<—NSFW Warning—> Hannibal / Vampire: The Masquerade Crossover ——> Rewritten (2020) <—>

Intertwined with blood, ruthless politics, and a world filled with darkness, the Masquerade holds vampires, regardless of their status, to a strict code of conduct within the city of Baltimore. A newborn vampire flung into the maelstrom of it all must abide by the unnatural laws set in place, in the midst of finding himself, and surviving the immortal night. A Prince with a thirst of complete dominion is blinded by his allies and enemies alike. In the city of Baltimore, the price of blood is more valuable than alliances.

Notes

<—Beginning Notes—> 2020

It's been little over three years since I've started "Kindred", and I've taken it upon myself to rewrite much of the content I've originally posted. If you're a previous reader, I'd suggest rereading the content of this fic with newly added tags and content warnings. I'd like to thank everyone for the feedback I received in the years and I hope this time around I've made "Kindred" more enjoyable. Thank you again.

———————————————

This story has been inspired by the events of Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines, along with many of the aspects from the World of Darkness. Characters have been worked into the original plot of Bloodlines and Hannibal for a newer experience for both medias. Other inspiration was taken from popular movies and tv shows involving vampires, the supernatural, and magic. Please take heed of any content or trigger warnings present either in the tags or in the corresponding chapters' beginning notes. Again, thank you for the support. In the end notes, I'll have extras linked.

See the end of the work for more notes

Welcome to Baltimore, Childe

Chapter Summary

Will Graham enters the life of a vampire.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I

"Welcome to Baltimore, Childe"

It always rained in Baltimore. The cityscape was dripping cold. Her denizens claim that the city mourned. For what reason, it was surely something superstitious. People lived, worked, and inevitably died; the tortuous cycle of mortal life. The rain, however, never stopped. It pierced and stole warmth from whomever it drenched.

It was amusing, to say the least, from high above the congestion and the mundane. The smog obscured the undesirable. He idly watched. With no one to share the sight, the Prince was alone on his perch, gloomily looking over the accursed city he owed his crown to.

There wasn't much more a creature as old as Hannibal could do once everything had been done. He'd traveled the world and the seven seas, seeing marvels and horrors of all kinds, then when he grew bored of that the Prince conquered said world and seven seas. In that life, he was nothing more than a warmonger marching from battlefield to battlefield. When that life had ended abruptly, he was granted a crown and a throne.

Though the crown fit rightfully so, the reign was fruitlessly *dull*.

Hannibal turned his interest away from his perch. The warm, glowing light of his office had dimmed the reds, browns, and blacks into lingering shadows. His meticulously curated décor was a show of wealth; a front, if he was so emboldened to say. He was a lover of the macabre and the raw; in particular, a fan of skulls.

He mounted his best and most challenging skulls in their own cases. The greatest of them all; the mortal man. Hannibal wasn't foreign to combat, or did he shy away from it when needed, but the mortal hunter was always a lingering threat. His hidden scars were telling; a reminder his body was still mortal. Whether it was Europe, Asia, or the Americas — the Prince was hunted every step of the way. With his elevated status, Hannibal worried little about the lone, zealous hunter but as a sect, they were meddlesome.

The Prince looked at his displays thoughtfully. Humorous for him to keep such trophies when nothing, especially now, would dare to hurt him. Even with his power, wealth, and prestige, Hannibal had found himself loathing for something exciting. The little self-fulfillment he had in his royal position dwindled into boredom.

He had been warned that boredom was a sign of an idle mind and like a sword, it must be tempered to keep the blade sharp. Hannibal played his hands in many hobbies such as cooking, though, he had no hunger for food. He learned to play all instruments in his possession. He traveled to the far, isolated stretches of the world, but found that his trips were lacking. More so, he became a scholar of the mind.

Yet, his boredom remained.

He was not alone in his office. His eyes darted to a small, feminine figure rigged into a rather, uncomfortable position. Hannibal didn't know her name; a worthless piece of information. She was young with hints of citrus and fear lingering on her. She pleaded with Hannibal to release her, or rather, do what he pleased if it meant she would survive. Hannibal wasn't an abuser, or did he take pleasure in unchecked sadism. She was nothing more than nourishment to him. He waltzed to her and his steps deftly vibrated along the floor. When he was close enough, he allowed his fingers to ghost along her shoulders, along her jaw, and through her hair. He felt the warmth of her skin underneath his fingertips — a foreign feeling, something he had forgotten over time. Entranced, his victim became pliant.

Hannibal sank his teeth deep into the soft, delicate flesh of his victim's throat. Blood ran down the corners of his mouth. The taste was surprisingly pleasant; smooth and light on the tongue. He drank deeply till the vitality of his victim had seeped out. She was like a rag doll and she had begun to pale.

A greedy one, this Prince was. He did not overindulge, but he did enjoy.

His hapless victim went limp in her bondage and Hannibal took a step back. He dabbed the corners of his lips with his finger and beamed at the redness blotching his finger pad. As he was about to lick the succulent drop, his office door was breached by an abnormally stoic figure of a man. Hannibal pressed his lips into a thin, discerning frown at the sudden interruption.

A clock chimed and echoed throughout the room.

"We must be late, aren't we?", Hannibal inquired, looking to a nearby, opulent clock mounted above him.

The man nodded. He kept his eyes lowered to the floor. Though he towered Hannibal when standing, he was complacent in the Prince's presence. He was dark-skinned with pale scars running off his skin like streaks of lightning. His eyes shrouded underneath a cover of lashes pierced like iron. Other than his posture, the equally abnormal-sized sword he kept strapped on his shoulder was striking. Hannibal had rather preferred his hired guard use something modern such as a firearm, but the sheer sight of the sword abated the most determined of attackers.

“Jack, bring the car around.”, Hannibal walked past his guard and out to the open space of his penthouse. “I shall meet you downstairs.”

“Yes, Prince Lecter.”, His guard, Jack, dutifully replied.

Hannibal affixed his clothing in the reflection of the giant panes looking over Baltimore. Jack had disappeared deftly out of the penthouse; not even Hannibal heard his exit. He tucked a silvery, misplaced strain of hair back then tightened his tie. He noticed a red blotch on his sleeve and grimaced. He would’ve preferred to dress into something cleaner, but like aforementioned — He was late to a rather more important event.

A trial was of utmost importance as the Prince of Baltimore must attend regardless of any other plans. It was a tedious thing that Hannibal loathed, but it was a sacred proceeding to ensure law was kept within their society. Hannibal had only briefed himself on the logistics of the trial, but the jury was never something he could anticipate.

Once he was doing zealously grooming himself, Hannibal emerged downstairs into the lobby of his private penthouse. He owned the entire building; though he was the only occupant. Like the wealth, having the building seem occupied was another front to deter wandering eyes and gossiping lips.

Hannibal stood underneath the visor of the building as the rain had begun to torrent.

Jack dutifully arrived in front of the building with one of Hannibal’s most prized possessions; a jet-black, older-style Bentley. Hannibal had accustomed the vehicle with darkened windows, though he did most of his traveling after dark, and the interior was suited for comfort. His bodyguard exited from the vehicle with an umbrella in tow. Hannibal gratefully took Jack’s offer and was escorted to the car. The Prince sat inside and once again, fixated on his appearance. When Jack entered the car again, he started the car and pulled off the curb.

The traffic was light for the time of night. Jack maintained a steady speed, but he was attentive to follow all rules of the road. Hannibal watched the city morph from high-rise to high-rise, then eventually said buildings had become obscured by stretches of expressway. They had to make a stop before arriving to the trial. He ushered for Jack to pull off from the expressway and into a secluded, upscale suburb near the Chesapeake.

“Stop here.”, Hannibal said, taking notice of a familiar house.

Jack pulled the Bentley to a stop. He exited the car again with the umbrella as a fair, blonde-haired woman waited patiently in the light of a doorway. Her red dress swirled around her legs like a satin shroud. Hannibal couldn’t help but sigh at the sight. She had noticed Jack’s arrival and she stepped out from the doorway. Even in the downpour, Hannibal saw how radiant she was. She walked underneath the umbrella along with Jack as the light from the doorway darkened behind them.

Hannibal shifted over in the back seat as the door was opened and the woman was let inside. They greeted each other warmly.

“Ms. Du Maurier, may I say you’re looking quite spectacular this evening?”, Hannibal said cheekily. “I am humbled to be in your presence.”

“Flattery will get you anywhere, but near my neck.”, the woman curtly replied. “You’re sweet for trying.”

Hannibal hid his amusement with a smile. Bedelia, as many words could describe her, was something phenomenal. She was intelligent, beautiful, and most importantly — capable of rivaling Hannibal’s in the amount of intellect they shared. She practiced restraint when needed or indulged when appropriate. For a mortal, Bedelia was interesting.

However, not interesting enough to sate his ravenous boredom.

Jack drove back onto the expressway as Bedelia and Hannibal initiated small talk. It was taboo to allow mortals into the affairs of nightly creatures, but Hannibal was the Prince and he had no one to answer to. Ms. Du Maurier was more than aware of the politics and knew where to place herself. She was naturally curious, but cautious in her dealings with Hannibal. Partners, yes, but never did she overstep her boundaries. The sex was a boon, but neither of them got in each other’s way. She was an excellent paramour, but not what Hannibal would call exciting. The Prince had turned his thoughts elsewhere during the car ride and Bedelia took notice.

“What are you thinking about, my Prince?”, she glanced at him from the corner of her eye.

Hannibal thought of home. Oddly enough, he thought of home as of late. Whether it was because of the lack of entertainment, he wasn’t certain but he thought of home often enough.

He thought of his mother country where the winters blanketed everything in pure white snow. He thought of his past life; the village, his family, and their eventual deaths. He was born in a time of economic rivarly, never-ending conflict, and strife. What was called the industrial age hadn’t touched his village quite yet. Life was simpler, dully simpler, but nonetheless wasn't complicated by encroaching modernism.

His father owed vast acres of land and enterprises, but his mother was a humble and beautiful homemaker.

She smelled of oak, fresh rain, and the whimsical notes of wildflowers. Where there was music, art, or good company, Hannibal’s mother was there to participate. Not a single person could loathe her — she was humility in the purest form.

Hannibal thanked much of his appearance to his mother, but only nothing but avarice to his father. He was a cruel, misshapen hunchback of a man in his later years that only wanted wealth and lust. Hannibal witnessed many occasions of such acts of deviance and the result — many a bastard sibling lingering amid the village crowd. Hushed whispers and silent criticisms befell on his mother for fostering bastards in her midst, and it seemed his mother was aloof to their existence. Regardless, he accepted them as his natural-born siblings and treated them as such.

What Hannibal could never forget, no matter how much time had evolved him, was the cruelty his mother endured till her eventual death. His father was abusive; obscenely so. Though his mother had shielded a young Hannibal from the truth, bruises couldn't be hidden. From the bruises, lashes, and beatings his mother suffered it all. Hannibal loved his mother, truly, but he was only a child with no strength to his fists or a voice of his own.

The morning the villagers found his mother's hanging corpse in the surrounding pines was the day Hannibal left his village and never returned.

Several centuries later, Hannibal held his mother's memory dear to his heart. He'd wished that he had the power to protect her then when she needed him the most, but immortality had taught him that to dwell on the past was to mourn a lifetime. He turned to look at Bedelia, softened his face, and reached for her hand.

In some odd way, she reminded him of his mother.

"My thoughts belong to you, my queen.", he said sweetly. "I think of nothing but you."

A lie, but Bedelia wouldn't dare to call him a liar.

Bedelia scoffed but beamed at another attempt of flattery. She fixated herself on studying Hannibal's facial expressions, but the Prince was a master of façade. He stared at her, unblinking, till she looked away to where a line of cars had idled.

Jack slowed the car into a stop. He cut the car's purring engine off and got out. Hannibal took note of the sudden queue. They were late, sure, but so was others. The trial couldn't start till Hannibal stepped into the venue and the beings waiting patiently outside groveled at the sight of his Bentley. Jack opened the door for his Prince, then Bedelia, and escorted the both underneath the umbrella.

The venue was nothing more than an old, macabre theater. Graffiti, broken windows, and the occasional ripped up promotional poster was all that was left of a once, respectable theater. It was chosen out of secrecy, but with the number of guests arriving as the Prince was escorted inside there was no doubt word had spread. A trial was uncommon in Baltimore unlike other cities. People followed the customs here.

Bedelia was on his arm as they were the first to enter the theater. Much to his status, she was looked at with the same adoration that he received. There weren't as many mortals as they were kindred; vampires and their ghoulish counterparts. Surely Bedelia was comfortable when Hannibal accompanied her, but without him, she would be nothing more than fodder.

Or did she think of herself akin to Hannibal?

She untangled herself from his arm and took her seat in the front row. Hannibal acknowledged her choice of seating as Jack came from behind. Both him and Hannibal stood on the rather small stage as the guests waiting outside had begun to pour in. They dressed drastically different from one another; the ones with wealth versus the common type. What they had in common, however, that they answered to Hannibal regardless of their affiliation.

Once most of the attendees had taken their seats, Hannibal ushered for someone to bring him a microphone.

He was handed a microphone and he held it up to his lips.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have invited you here tonight in hopes to cast judgement on one of our own.”, the Prince announced.

He scanned the crowd for their reactions. The theater erupted with whispers and gasps from all sides as Hannibal gave them a moment amongst themselves. Behind him was a dusty, deep red curtain that trailed off the stage. The stagehands up above rolled them back as two, heavily armed guards escorted two handcuffed captives. The crowd became hostile in their disapproval as the captives were forced to kneel. A series of insults and curses erupted from lips and Hannibal was sure if he wasn’t there, the two captives would’ve been torn apart.

He raised his hand to silence their growing disdain.

“Their crimes are unforgivable.”, Hannibal announced as he turned to the prisoner closest to him. “Their ignorance to our way of life is unforgivable.”

The other prisoner was much older than the other one, but just as guilty. Hannibal examined them for a moment. The older prisoner smelled of musk and filth, but physically he was no different than anyone else in the theater. The leather assemble he wore was striking along with the track marks on inked skin. The younger prisoner, however, smelled lively and fresh rather than a decaying corpse. On further examination, Hannibal recognized the puncture marks deep and rouge in the prisoner’s neck and the Prince hid his disdain behind a curt smile.

A newborn or better known as a ‘fledgling’ in their world of darkness. They were rather infantile as the name suggested, but this infant had already grown fangs that protruded from his sickly, pink gums. There was nothing about this fledgling that screamed helpless newborn.

The prisoner, in the shortest of words, was bewildered at the sight of the theater but when he looked to Hannibal — The Prince was taken aback.

A trueborn Malkavian.

Hannibal had heard rumors of newborn Malkavians turning up in Maryland but seeing one in person was rather exciting. Their population had been unfruitful in terms of birthing new fledglings, at least, in the current decade. Baltimore had only few notable ones, not that Hannibal made efforts to meet them, but they existed.

Malkavians were both feared and held in awe as their bloodline was riddled with insanity. Like their forefather, Malkav, their madness was a two-faced coin. The Prince heard that their power of foresight was valued in many courts around the world and if the prisoner had gained such a power, Hannibal could use such a gift.

A wonder to many, but a curse to all.

The Prince scanned the crowd for their reaction. Faces upturned in disgust, a few in wonder, while others were blank — a courtesy of the grave; facial muscles tended to decay after so many years. He made eye contact with Bedelia, who in all words, agreed to whatever Hannibal planned next. He straightened his posture to address the crowd once more.

“As we are all aware of our laws and customs, it is the most heinous act to embrace a kine without the direct permission of a Prince.”, Hannibal explained.

“To break our sacred laws is exposing ourselves to danger.”

In unison, the crowd voiced their anger and discontentment towards the two prisoners restrained on the stage. It was like a red, hot ball of fire being thrown. Hannibal reveled it in all as he turned for Jack to approach closer. His hired guard unsheathed his sword and allowed the heavy metal blade to rest at his side.

“Punishment for such an act is the final death.”, Hannibal looked down where the older prisoner grimaced at him.

The younger prisoner jostled in his bondage and fell to his side. A stream of tears moistened his cheeks and Hannibal watched with his eyes turned downwards. As beautiful as the newly turned vampire was, it was not Hannibal who wanted this outcome but their law. No matter how those gorgeous, hazy blue eyes would blink underneath a canopy of brown lashes, Hannibal could not cave in.

The Masquerade was their doctrine to their survival rather than oppression of their freedoms. Though many a revolutionary would argue with such a statement, all parties could agree that revealing themselves to the world meant the end of their kind. Many a time Hannibal had witnessed blatant disregard for the law and like always — lawbreakers met their end at the stake.

The Camarilla, what Hannibal was supposedly had undying loyalty for, enforced their laws with an iron fist. Vampires regardless of their bloodline paid their loyalty to the sect, but over the years that loyalty had festered into unharbored hatred. Hannibal scanned the crowd to see grimacing faces; the few of thousands outside this theater who loathed the Camarilla’s oversight. There will be talks of oppression in the air later in the night, but in this moment, Hannibal had to play his role.

Even if it had started to bore him.

The Prince kneeled to where the young prisoner begged helplessly. His finger traced a curve along the man’s cheek and cusped it. He grabbed a fistful of hair, careful not to tug, and forced the young man to look at him in the eyes.

“I’m sorry.”, Hannibal said, a tinge of moroseness in his tone. “Forgive me.”

He let the young captive go. The Prince stood and stepped to the side. He rolled up his wrist to reveal his watch. A quarter past midnight, but not a moment too soon.

Jack came closer with his sword raised high and Hannibal averted his eyes away. Truly, he was sorry. The fledgling was not at fault, but his careless sire took it upon himself to break their laws. Had his ruffian of a maker took the proper requirements on acquiring a progeny, perhaps, Hannibal would've granted such a privilege. He'd never been a progenitor himself; let alone a father. He mused on the thought of having his very own fledgling — an esteemed Ventrue like himself, or even, adopt a suave Toreador that could be molded for leadership. Brushing those thoughts aside, the Prince looked to the startled fledgling and then turned to the crowd.

A Malkavian wouldn't be terrible either.

Hannibal grinned at the crowd and in return, they exclaimed their love and undying adoration for him. It would be tough, but not impossible.

Hannibal thought of sparing the fledgling in a show of mercy, but with how the crowd howled for blood — his hands were tied.

After all, Baltimore was a rather lonely, unexciting place with boring things and boring people.

Will Graham wasn't spectacular or was he ordinary. He had no distinguishing features or mannerisms, but he'd been told his eyes were remarkable. He liked flattery and to be flattered. Once upon a time, he had liked to think he was a bit of both, but his circumstances were nothing but ordinary. The cigarette between his glistening lips drooped with ash. He gave it a slight jerk and the ash tumbled down onto the sidewalk.

The night was cold, as usual at this time of year, but he was far colder than what the environment was. He shivered though he was bundled up from head to toe. He thirsted, but not for water. His skin crawled for a familiar scratch.

He desired a fix to a bad itch. Never did he inject, a lesson learned from the many overdoses he'd witnessed, but he partook in smoking. It left him in a state of bliss, but the come-down was hellish.

He was depressed, for the most part, and given that he'd already fallen so far — there was not much left to pick up. He thought of it as self-medicating, as many people in his situation tried to believe in, but the pieces shattered into fine dust every time he took a drag.

He'd never imagine himself loitering on a corner every night, waiting for anyone really to pick him up, then on his back or on his knees in a dirty, flea-ridden room. Baltimore was cold, wet, and unforgiving to him. When he was younger, he wanted nothing more than to flee his tiny, rural world of Louisiana to any place that didn't have cicadas hissing in the night or swamp water pooling at his feet. How greedy he used to be when he was a child, but he had a plethora of reasons not to stay in sleepy, alligator-infested Louisiana.

On the contrary, his parents were traditional in a sense that Will Graham could've modeled their happy marriage with a nice, respectable girl. Louisiana would've been tolerable. He would've been sober and employed. He could've had a nice house by the water with his kids

helping him to make new tackles or fixing boat motors. He tried, truly, but he couldn't seem get a grip. His mother told him to take his time while his father suggested to dive head-first. They meant well, sure, but Will was simply not the one for the mold.

He proved himself right; he wasn't a perfect fit.

He turned his thoughts elsewhere. Will saw himself in a reflection of a car window. He was neither ugly nor undesirable, in fact, he prided himself on being gorgeous. When he shaved, he was a boyish nymph. He stuck out rather than the fellow night prowlers. He's seen some of his so called "competition" and Will was by far the better looking of them all. Eventually, he would look as ghoulish as the others that braved the johns such as he did, but he would rather not dwell on that thought.

To be youthful was a curse to the old.

As Will was going to turn in for the evening, he noticed the headlights of a car cruising from the opposite way. He looked over his shoulder to find that it was an older-style Cadillac with rims that were too expensive for such an older car. The paint was chipped and patched with colors of the wrong hue — something that bothered Will on a smaller, more perfectionist scale. He turned completely around and waited for the Cadillac to either come to a stop or speed away. His heart was beating so hard in his chest.

Will was always nervous when a potential client was approaching him. Whether in a bar or on the street, it was the unforeseen danger that riled his guts and left a lump in his throat. This solicitor could just want companionship or leave Will dead in an alleyway. Nonetheless, Will stood like a deer trapped in the headlights.

The car slowed down enough to where Will could see a faint outline of the driver inside. The tinted windows rolled down and Will stood there for a moment — eyeing the driver inside.

The driver took off his sunglasses and looked to Will. The younger man questioned why anyone would wear sunglasses at night, but it must've been a style choice. He was rather good-looking for someone inked with tattoos on every inch of skin visible. Will made count of how many piercings the man had in his face, then, drifted his eyes to study the many different colors dyed haphazardly into his hair.

"Looking for a date?", Will suggested, pulling down his jacket to reveal the flesh of his collar bone. His skin was a perfect alabaster, untainted, and free of track marks.

The driver eyed him, almost suspiciously, and then reached for the passenger door. Will accepted his offer and slipped inside the Cadillac. The seats were warm, not enough to knock the chill off, but warm enough for Will to huddle in. The driver pulled from the street and drove for a considerable long time. Will kept his mind from the many unfavorable destinations his client could be taking him; preferably to an early grave, yet Will didn't dare to voice it out loud. He watched streetlights become dim beacons in the cloudy, night sky. Eventually, the driver made short talk over the weather and how cold it was, then practically warmed up to Will.

“I haven’t lived in Baltimore long. Have you?”, the driver’s accent was heavy, possibly foreign, and Will found himself lulled by it.

Will contemplated.

“Yes.”, a lie. Will was as much as a foreigner as his client.

“I’m on a short vacation. It’s nice to get away sometimes, sí?”, the driver chirped, pulling the car into a nearby parking structure. “I haven’t introduced myself.”

Will pursed his lips and took a careful look at what his surroundings were; concrete walls encasing him with one way out. The client could mean well or Will was potentially facing his murderer — whatever the outcome, he prayed it would be quick. He tried to smile as the client offered him his hand.

“Mateo. And tú?”

“Will.”

“A strong name for such a baby face.”, Mateo jested, shaking hands with Will. “I’m kidding.”

Will hadn’t thought he would have such a thing as a ‘baby-face’, but it was a rather flattering remark compared to what he’s been called before. Mateo took his keys from the ignition and he was out the car. His younger companion hesitated, but soon joined him walking out the parking structure. As they walked, Mateo dug in his pocket and Will watched cautiously. His anxiety was rewarded with a thick ball of crumpled bills and Will counted each individual bill.

It was more than enough; at least for a hotel room, a hot meal, and possibly new clothes for the week. Will thanked Mateo and half-considered running away, but the city looked unfamiliar to him at this time of night. Instead, he waited as Mateo fiddled with the keys looped on the keyring.

It was the least he could do.

Eventually, Mateo used the right key to let him and Will into the foyer of the apartment. It smelled of stale mold and cleaning solution as Will politely tried to shield his nose.

I shouldn’t be picky, Will thought. *I’ve had sex in alleyways before*.

Mateo practically skipped up the stairs and Will trailed closely behind. Soon they both were in an apartment rather too small for two people to live comfortably. The first thing Will noticed about the living space was the number of posters, shelves upon shelves of what he could make out as ‘paraphernalia’, and general mess. The kitchen was missing much of the essentials, a working stove, an upgraded refrigerator, and a clean countertop. Will got out of his jacket as Mateo disrobed from his heavier jacket.

Will walked shyly around the room, picking up a knickknack here and there, and making a mental note on what he could use as a weapon. He eyed a rather antique-looking bass guitar in the far corner near the television. He didn’t know how to play an instrument though many

an occasion his father showed him a thing or two. He thought to ask Mateo, but he was out of sight.

What stuck out the most, however, was the only two windows. They were tediously obscured by a thick layer of plastered newspaper. Will silently wondered why anyone would cover their own source of sunlight let alone fresh air but was startled when Mateo grabbed him by his waist. He was pulled backwards till they were both on the couch.

He was used to rough treatment, but to be suddenly grabbed in such a manner frightened him. He didn't let it show, however, and guarded his emotions behind a small, nervous sigh. Mateo wrapped both his legs between Will's as he reached onto the cluttered coffee table. He grabbed what he was looking for and Will's nearly drooled. A familiar sight; an elongated, glass pipe. It was accompanied by a small baggie of what Will could only describe as *euphoria*.

"Do you partake?", Mateo inquired quietly, holding the small baggie higher.

"Yes…", Will trailed off. "But not a lot…"

Another lie; Will was greedy.

Mateo nodded. Will held his excitement on his tongue as Mateo raised the both up. The tatted-up client was quite an expert on the prep work on what Will could only anticipate as a good high. Mateo offered first and Will greedily accepted; raising the pipe to his lips. Mateo flicked a flame from his lighter and Will inhaled. The rush was instant; the most welcomed calm to Will's maelstrom.

It didn't take long for Will to become lax and docile. He overindulged, not on purpose, but Mateo seemed to not mind. In fact, he offered more to his young companion till eventually Will was slumped over. He could feel roving hands down his sides and between his legs and he did not

Will truly didn't care what happened. If fate was fickle, he'd sleep a plentiful amount and wake up with the money still in his pocket.

Mateo was rather a sensual lover and throughout the night, Will was made to relieve himself numerous times. Will was so used to giving pleasure that he'd blocked himself from indulging that when Mateo fondled him — it was quick work to let go. The romance continued into the late-night hours when Will finally fell asleep. He felt wet kisses up his neck, then a nibble, and finally a bite that made him wince. Blood dribbled down his neck, onto his collar, and eventually to his hands. He did not react, thanks to the drug in his system, and was rocked to sleep.

"We'll be together forever, Will.", he heard Mateo whisper in the throes of fading consciousness. "I'll take care of you."

Sure. Will thought. *You can do that all you like*.

Will drifted off to sleep as Mateo continued with his handiwork. Eventually, morning would come, and Will would stumble off into the morning preferably to a diner with fresh coffee. Or better yet, he wouldn't wake at all.

Yet, what came next was nothing but a waking nightmare. Will woke up a gut-wrenching, sharp cramp in his stomach followed by an unquenchable thirst. His head hummed with a thousand different sounds and his vision blurred. He was never a one to wear his glasses, preferring contacts over them, but he was practically blinded.

He untangled himself from Mateo's bulky limbs and stumbled towards the kitchen. He fell onto his knees halfway and cried out from the sudden bolt of pain. He regained his footing and continued towards the kitchen. He ran his hand along the wall for a switch in the much darker living space. To no avail, he felt his way through the dark till he was in the kitchen.

His hand curled around the handle of the shabby refrigerator and he pulled with all his might. The light within blinded him for a moment. Inside, there was a few drinks and unrecognizable foodstuffs and Will reached for the first water bottle he saw. He practically ripped it apart and squeezed the contents inside down his throat.

It felt like hot oil was being poured down his throat as he spat out a mixture of water and bile. His tongue sizzled from the irritation. He threw the water bottle down onto the floor and reached for a bag of something else in the fridge. It was red, even in the dark, and Will did not hesitate to rip the plastic and slurp on the contents. This time, it was cool and refreshing, and Will greedily sucked it down. From across the room, Mateo rose up from the beaten-up sofa. His eyes shined like yellow lanterns and Will leaned against the countertop. A cold sweat had begun to bubble on his forehead. They shared no words as Will tried to regain composure.

"You can feel me, can't you?' a soft yet suave voice purred to Will and the young man bristled. "Hear me, can't you?"

Will stiffened. No one was talking or was the television turned on. He looked to Mateo to see the man staring, unblinking, and void of expression.

"You're a vampire.", Mateo's voice was velvety-smooth and oddly comforting. "I have embraced you."

Embraced. Will only stared wide-eyed into the light of the refrigerator.

He opened his mouth to speak to Mateo but was abruptly startled by the door being caved in and a troupe of armed individuals storming inside. He was grabbed and forced onto the floor while Mateo was approached then thrown against the wall. Dishes clattered and cracked onto the tiled floor.

Will opened his mouth to scream, but the brute force of a heavy boot came hurling towards his side. Red froth escaped from the corners of his lips as he was being tied-up, then dragged across the floor, towards the stairs. He could hear Mateo yelling in his native tongue then some more clattering. His kidnappers seemed annoyed, or at least, unbothered by Will's

attempt to fight them. He caught a glimpse of Mateo being bunted with a heavy rifle and a sharp, burning pain cascaded across Will's head.

I wasn't hit. Will winced at the throbbing pain on the sides of his head. Yet I felt everything.

Will was hit again by someone's fist and black spots had flooded into his vision. What seemed to be moments of unconsciousness was much longer than he'd thought. He had awoken to being forced onto the floor with a thousand vicious, angry voices yelling at him. His hands were bound behind his back and he could still feel the stinging bite of the fist against his cheek. The lights above him was bright and he winced at the sudden illumination. Beside him was Mateo, equally roughed up, and more so confused to their sudden predicament.

Will's head swam. His hearing had been impaired from the blows. From one side, he heard a woman crying in his ear, but from the other side he could hear the rhythmic thump of a heartbeat. His nostrils flared at the smell of blood. His world was soon swimming again as he lost consciousness till, he felt his curly hair grabbed forcefully by someone. His face contorted in pain and he was forced to look up.

His eyes widened. It was a man, much older than him but quite handsome, and his maroon eyes dug deep like knives. A silvery strand had fallen out of place, but it was tucked behind an ear swiftly. Will had tried to look away, but it felt like those pair of eyes were forcing his uttermost attention. Will swallowed then was released.

Words had been said, but Will could only avert his eyes to Mateo. His client looked at him mournfully, almost in tears. He had begun to mouth what Will could only make out as an apology, but for what, Will wasn't sure.

"You'll be boiled into a stew, little rabbit.", some voice echoed in the back of Will's mind. "Run, run away."

"Death's awaiting.", a woman's voice called out ominously. "You shouldn't look away."

He winced again at the sudden loudness the voice had taken as blood began to dribble out his ears.

The man with the dark eyes had ushered for someone much bigger, more sinister to loom over both him and Mateo. Will's mouth fell agape behind his gag as he saw the heavy piece of welded iron fall between him and Mateo. He looked to his former client to find him begging, no, sobbing with the man in front of them. Will couldn't make out sounds except for white noise. He wanted to say something, anything for them to stop, but nothing came out. Not even his own voice could be heard in the white noise deafening his ears. The crowd exploded into murderous glee as Will couldn't face them anymore. He closed his eyes and let his tears fall.

He felt something hot and bright flush on his skin then the sounds of clapping. When Will opened one of his eyes — the sight left him shaken to the core. He saw Mateo's head, or where it should've been, void of a neck. It laid on the stage in a pool of red-black goop. Will laughed then the laughter turned into sobs. Mateo's body flopped to it's side where it began

to crackle then combust into a bright orange hue. Only smoldering, grey ash was left along with a puddle of blood. When Will looked to the man with the dark eyes, he felt all life leave his body. Those eyes were cruel, *unbelievably* cruel.

He was next; he could feel it. The hunkering man with the sword turned it towards him and Will let out a shaky laugh. He always had hoped he died in his sleep or by a car, but never did he think he would be beheaded He lowered his head and through lidded eyes, he saw the crowd rile up in glee at his impending death.

What a bad trip he was having…

Chapter End Notes

Please take the survey I've linked at the bottom of the work. Thanks for the support. Copying and pasting from Word often messes up the format.

First Lessons

Chapter Summary

Will Graham had been illegally embraced as a newborn vampire and given a second chance to prove his worth.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings for implied and/or referenced trauma. Please be careful proceeding.

II
"First Lessons"

Will felt the cold sting of the blade on his bare shoulder. He began to shiver as the man addressing the crowd had looked at him again. The coagulated blood crawling across the stage floor had begun to touch Will's legs and he couldn't help but gag at the sight. He had started to plead with his eyes. He wanted to live, desperately, even much so as Mateo's body was nothing more than ashes to be swept up and tossed away.

He looked to the man who called himself "the Prince" with a pitiful look staining his face. His upper jaw throbbed horribly. The gag in his mouth shifted uncomfortably and a thick, lazy glob of salvia dribbled down his chin. He must've looked ridiculous, but he wanted nothing more than to plead his case. He didn't know Mateo well, or the people in the crowd, none of this made sense to him. Sure, he solicited Mateo for a night's rest and a good hit, but that didn't make him a bad person — did it? The entire situation was nothing more than a jumbled, confusing mess of things.

On the other hand, Will had every right to be confused. Bodies didn't combust in flame or turned into ash. Will didn't have a clue of what he'd gotten himself into, yet he wanted nothing more but freedom. His fleeting thoughts turned to his childhood; the haunting few he couldn't repress.

He remembered the everglades, the mosquitos that danced along the water's edges, and the family picnics every weekend. The smell of swamp water wafted up his nostrils like cooling pecan pie. He liked fishing and barbecue. His knees were always scraped from his swamp adventures. His aunts and mother cooked up a storm in the house while the men fished down the road. He didn't go; his fishing rod was missing. The children played hopscotch or stole sweets from their unsuspecting elders. His father sat in his rocking chair, his aged eyes

surveying the rows of houses scattered down the road, with a beer warming between his burly thighs. The few friends he'd gained over the years came by on their bikes with scrapped knees. Will wasn't a fan of bikes; he never learned how to ride one properly.

He remembered two cousins in particular; John and Robert. They were older than him, only by a few years, but twice the weight and height. He could picture Robert with his blotchy face and chin length red-hair. His brother, John, was nothing but muscle and acne. They played rough with Will given he was the scrawniest of all the cousins. Took his toys, butted him out the way, or when they felt ruthless — they'd crush Will's glasses.

Will never particularly cared for his glasses; they were bulky and always fell off his boyish face. Yet when John or Robert smashed them, he couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness seeing the twisted frames and broken lens. Till this day, Will refused to wear another pair of glasses.

One evening couldn't be etched from his mind as he could no longer see the crowd. After a night of eating and carousing, Will sat at the pond in his parents 'backyard. He didn't hear John at first or Robert till they were upon him. He was held down at the water's edge with mud and dirt smothering him, a knee to his back, and a sharp pain running up and down his spine. Afterwards, Will couldn't walk quite right or seem to catch his balance.

It was a painful experience though psychiatrists told him it would be a process. It mattered little; he visualized every second with vivid recollection. He wanted to block the memory, but it always crept on him in the most inconvenient of times — such as this.

Will didn't know why he was thinking of such trauma when in mere minutes he could be dead, but it left him wondering on how turbulent his life once was. He reveled in the memory of hearing that heavy rock squelch against his older cousin's skull once the ordeal was over and he walked to his house with bloodied legs. Though his parents were distraught, naturally, as their only son was carried off in a police cruiser — their surprise turned into anger, then finally into disappointment. He remembered how the rocking chair rocked solemnly on the porch as his house became nothing more than a bygone speck in the distance.

It could be worse. Will watched the Prince cross the stage with the microphone still up to his lips. *I could have overdosed instead*.

On second thought, Will didn't think that was such a bad outcome.

For what, Will couldn't say, but his parents never spoke to him afterwards. His family distanced themselves to the point of unfamiliarity. He moved far, far away where he couldn't be hurt anymore. Yet now, here he was waiting for his eventual execution. He thought of his parents; how they were doing, had they missed him, or did they truly forget about him. The drugs that had once mellowed in his system now did an adverse effect; making him panic tenfold.

"As well all know, it's a crime against us kindred, to embrace mortals without my direct permission.", the Prince had begun, pointing towards Will.

Kindred. The word was foreign to Will.

The crowd hissed and Will kept his head towards his lap. They were going to kill him regardless if Will could prove his innocence. He had no choice in the matter at this point. He silently prayed that anything, or anyone, would cause a distraction.

The Prince's words only rattled around like coins in a piggy bank. He tried to get the Prince to look at him again, to plead, or even usher for a chance to speak. Yet the man did not return anymore looks to Will's direction, rather, he kept his eyes affixed to the reactions of the bloodthirsty crowd.

The gargantuan man wielding the sword came closer to Will's side and he could see his full reflection on the bloodied hunk of metal. The Prince kneeled just enough where he could see Will's shaky eyes.

"Forgive me.", the statement was mournfully toned and empathic. "This is not what I wanted for you."

For me? Will couldn't think someone that pranced around with the title of "Prince" could have such empathy. After all, he was the one ordering the execution.

"Therefore, as your Prince, I propose…", the Prince's words were cut off by the sound of the theater doors whooshing open. Will shot his eyes towards that said door and nearly cried.

A much asked for distraction.

"You can't do this, you son of a bitch!", a man's voice yelled out then accompanied by a face.

The man had stormed down the aisle way with a serenade of boos and slurs hurled at him as he was trailed from behind. Another man and a woman followed the one who made the outburst. They both kept themselves close to their much louder companion as the Prince smiled thinly at the boisterous interruption. The Prince licked his lips and furrowed his brows at the intruder. Will watched the fine wrinkles of his brow tighten.

"Matthew Brown, I hadn't thought you would've accepted my invitation.", the Prince said coyly, giving a name to said intruder. "A pleasure to see you again."

"You have no fucking right to do this, Hannibal.", the man named Matthew argued, pointing towards where Mateo's blood had coagulated. "You're going to kill an innocent fledgling."

Piercing blue eyes met with Will's and he quickly looked back down.

Fierce. Will thought. Fierce and beautiful.

Hannibal, whose name sounded tart on Will's tongue, averted his eyes to where Will shivered in his bondage. He pursed his lips, scanned the audience, then looked to Matthew. He fixed his arm cuffs as Jack stepped in front of Will, sword high in his grasp, and a stern look on his stoic face.

"If you had let me finish, dear Matthew, you'd hear that I'd be sparing this innocent fledgling.", with that announcement, the crowd hushed into gasps and gossip.

There was a change in the air – the kind that left the room eerily quiet, save for the whispers. Will could see changing expressions; some blank, others relieved, and far more angered. The Prince was inadvertently nonchalant about the waxing mood in the room, as if he expected the response, and he remained poised and confident in his stance.

“This fledgling will be taught our laws and custom as many of us have had the privilege of sires to do as such.”, the Prince glared Matthew down.

Will looked to where Matthew had grown flustered in the middle of the aisle way. He looked just as young as himself, but bulkier and inked with tattoos. His cropped hair glistened with what appeared to be sweat, but the night was far too cold to perspire. His clothes looked like what Mateo wore apart from a brightly colored collared shirt. His companions dressed alike with the taller man having hair touching his shoulders. The woman looked like a walking inferno; curls just as bright as fire, and her glare was menacing. He silently thanked the man then turned to look at Hannibal.

The dead silence remained in the theater. They were astonished, if not surprised at the suddenness of the announcement. It was uncommon for a fledgling, let alone any other vampire, to be spared a stay of execution. The crowd’s wandering eyes, and fickleness only dissolved into acceptance as their Prince could not be questioned. His hired guard sheathed his sword onto his shoulder and stood far away from Will — a relief to him. Matthew seemed satisfied, or at least, willing to take the stay of execution as he turned on his heels in a heated flush. He stomped away as his companions took one long, lasting survey at the audience. Some words in a foreign tongue was exchanged then they too left the theater.

Hannibal raised the microphone to his lips again.

“I thank you all for coming. I hope the significance of this night has not been lost.”, he said coolly.

“Let this be an example of mercy rather than an act of cruelty.”, Hannibal looked directly to Will.

In unison, the audience rose to their feet and clapped towards Hannibal. Will was sure they were brainwashed to some degree. They left as quickly as they could, leaving nothing but their lingering whispers in the air, and an emptiness in the theater. The only one left sitting was a blonde-haired woman draped in red. Will could hear her heartbeat; the only heartbeat in the room, and it was a calm, steady beat. He looked away from her as Hannibal kneeled and undid the gag still locked between Will’s lips. The sudden relief made his jaw lax. He was quite dumbstruck as soon as the gag was relieved, the bindings on his wrists were next, then he was brought to his feet.

Hannibal examined him with a keen eye. He flicked dirt from here and there, fixed a stray curl, then made a ‘tutting’ noise at the sight of Will’s bruised cheek. He lifted one of Will’s arms and noticed the light pink streaks running side-by-side. Hannibal seemed discontent with the discovery, but Will did not dare to squirm away.

“Oh, you poor thing.”, Hannibal cooed. “You’ll heal.”

Will remained silent as he couldn't help but take in Hannibal himself. His hair looked like woven starlight and the contrast against his sun-kissed skin was alluring. His features were sharp, almost chiseled by an artist and there was a sense of proudness with how refine they were. Will's eyes drifted down to his paisley tie; the colors swirling into a nauseating hypnosis.

"I am your Prince.", Hannibal pulled down Will's sleeves to cover the blemishes. "You should address me as such."

Will bit the inside of his cheek. It was a quite absurd notion to call anyone that, especially in such a modern age, but how Hannibal looked down at him — it wavered nothing but absolute, unquestionable authority. He sucked up the few ounces of pride he retained and gazed into Hannibal's eyes.

"Yes, my Prince.", the phrase tasted bitter.

Hannibal seemed elated.

"Do you have a name, fledgling?"

"My name is Will. Will Graham."

"A beautiful name, may I say?", Hannibal purred, reaching to curl one of his fingers around another of Will's stray curls. "Walk with me."

Will's legs compelled him to follow Hannibal as they left the stage. Backstage was littered with old stage props, promotional posters, and a few dusty costumes. In its hay day, Will could imagine dozens of actors, actresses, and stagehands whirling around in a hurry to prepare for the stage. Only dust and soiled dreams remained in the dreary place.

"Your first lesson will be in respect.", Hannibal said, gesturing with his finger for Will to stand up straighter. "Your posture, for example, could use some work."

The younger man did as he told; bringing himself to stand as straight as possible. His body still ached from the beating, but he did his best to comply. Possibly pleased, Hannibal gave him a curt smile.

The Prince ushered Will to follow him again; trailed by the Prince's hired guard.

"As I've mentioned, you'll be educated in our laws and customs. Eventually, you'll come to find yourself be well-versed in your new lifestyle." Will grimaced, but only met Hannibal's scornful gaze.

"Speaking of which, are you aware of your new lifestyle?", Hannibal raised his brows to Will.

Will gave an uncertain nod. Truly, he couldn't piece together what's happened to him. Water felt like burning gasoline down his throat, his solicitor got his head cut off, and he was hearing weird, garbled voices in his head. His upper jaw felt uncomfortably sore and it felt like he was biting down on his tongue.

Hannibal sighed.

“You’re *kindred* — a child of the night, or what the mortals call us, *vampire*.”

Will felt a gnawing sickness curl in his belly. That confirmed what Mateo had told him earlier in the night. As much as he wanted to call Hannibal a liar, it explained much of the night’s affairs. He did not thirst for water, but for something more vivacious and sanguine. He realized he hadn’t taken a breath in quite a while. Surely, if he was a vampire, vampires didn’t have the need to breathe. He wondered if he could fly. The fledgling looked to his Prince with sullen eyes.

“Please kill me.”, Will’s lips trembled. “For I cannot be what you say.”

“I will dispose of you when I’m ready to, William.”, Hannibal said sternly, gesturing towards his hired guard. “Until then, you’ll stay very much alive.”

The hired guard wielding the sword gave a Will wayward glance, but no further words needed to be exchanged. Will nodded his head in agreement.

“I’m sorry…”, the apology trailed off as Will caught himself again.

Hannibal dismissed it.

“I’m assuming you have a place to stay for the night?”, Hannibal had paused, his demeanor beginning to lax. “Or did your former sire?”

Will shook his head. He didn’t want to go back to Mateo’s apartment, not after all that’s happened. He wasn’t superstitious but the last thing he needed was some vengeful, drug-fueled ghost haunting him.

Hannibal softened his expression for a moment; perhaps a show of authentic empathy, but Will was cautious about him.

“I expected as much.”

Will stuffed his hands in his pocket and shamefully looked away. Hannibal ‘tutted’ again. His bodyguard had lingered nearby but approached when Hannibal snapped his fingers at him. He spoke to him in that same foreign language that made Will’s head swim. The Prince looked to the fledgling with softer eyes.

“You’re in luck, William. I already have a space settled for you.”, maybe Hannibal sensed Will’s reluctance to return to Mateo’s apartment.The Prince opened his suit to retrieve a small, delicate business card. He handed it over to Will and the fledgling took the card. An address was wrote in meticulously perfected cursive; 1616 Tudor Lane Unit 9.

“Thank you.”, Will uttered, rubbing the card between his fingers. He slipped it into his pocket.

Hannibal beamed.

“When you leave this place, you will meet Frederick Chilton. His residence is on the other side of the Chesapeake Bay.”, Hannibal pointed to a door not from where they stood. “He’s an acquittance of mine. I suggest you treat him with the same respect you give to me.”

Will nodded.

“There will be a taxi waiting for you on the street. The fare has already been paid.”

Will nodded again. His head throbbed a little.

“Don’t disappoint me, William.”

The Prince stepped aside and warily, Will walked past him. There was a breeze between them, and Will felt coldness surrounding Hannibal. It was unnerving, more so on how Hannibal’s stare buried deep, and Will cringed. He wondered if Hannibal knew how cold he felt to be around.

He reached the door and opened it. He was greeted by the familiar cold night air as the door nosily closed behind him. Though he had little on, the cold didn’t seem to bother him like it did before. Strangely enough, it was a welcoming feeling.

He was in an alleyway littered with trash cans, overturned shopping carts, and broken glass. He smelled a thousand different smells but heard just as many new voices. He could feel the earth under his feet and heard the rats in the sewers. A car alarm blared nearby. A baby laughed. As surreal as the feelings were, it was flooding his already peaked senses. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

The feeling eventually subsided.

Not entirely sure on his next move, Will leaned his back against the theater’s exit door. He was alive, for the most apart, and at least had a place to stay. Will dug out the business card again and traced his eyes over the letters. He looked down the alleyway to the street where the gleam of a bright, yellow taxi waited alone in the night’s haze. Will stepped off the landing, but before he could meet the said taxi — he heard a shrill whistle.

Behind him, he saw a tall, toned man dressed in black leather dangling a cigarette between his lips. His coiled hair shrouded much of his face, but Will recognized the man from inside the theater. He had accompanied Matthew. He dressed as ruggedly as Matthew did with an exception of an all-black attire rather than a bright shirt. Will warily stood underneath a flickering spotlight as the stranger didn’t move. He turned on his heels and looked to the taxi. He started a brisk walk but was startled when the man had appeared in front of him.

“Let’s talk, fledgling.”, the man said, his voice husky and commanding. “I promise, I’m not here to hurt you.”

Will tensed and looked behind him. If he were to yell, would Hannibal’s guard come to help him? Will doubted it as the man flicked his shortening cigarette into a nearby puddle. He raised his hands up.

“I don’t know of you, but you must be a figment of my imagination.”, Will replied, slightly taken aback by his own response. He brought his finger up to his lips and pursed them.

The man seemed elated when Will spoke; his silvery blue-tinted eyes lighting up. He approached closer and Will instinctively took a step back.

“It’s not every night I meet a *Malkavian*.”, the man admitted, pointing to the puncture marks peeking out from Will’s collar. “Or a fledgling at that.”

Malkavian.

Will documented the word into his vocabulary. He raised his collar up. He would ask about it later, but he was unsure whether this stranger was friendly or waiting for an opportunity to kill him.

“My name’s Zeller. Brian Zeller.”, Brian introduced himself. “I’m a Brujah. I’m sure you’ve seen me earlier.”

Brujah. Will noted another phrase to his vocabulary.

Will did recognize him alongside Matthew. He nodded and looked past Brian’s shoulder. The taxi had vanished, as if it was never there, and Will felt a ball of distress settle in his gut. He opened his mouth to protest but closed it. He gave a stressed look to Brian.

“I was asked by the Prince to visit someone by the name of—“, Will said, trembling, pointing towards the street.

He was interrupted by Brian growling and punting a glass bottle across the alleyway.

“First lesson, fledgling, *fuck* the Prince.”, Brian announced, flicking his middle finger up to the night sky. Will held his breath, or what would’ve been a breath, at the suddenness of Brian’s proclamation. If the Prince was still inside the theater, he was sure he would’ve heard Brian’s outcry. A few moments passed, but the Prince or his armed guard came out from the exit. Will sighed in relief as Brian dug out another cigarette.

“Aren’t you going to tell me your name, kid?”, Brian asked, lighting the cigarette.

“My name is Will…”, Will watched how the ash began to curl around the cigarette, enticing his own taste buds.

“Well Will, do you have anywhere to stay for the night? Sunlight isn’t exactly our best friend.”, Brian asked, pointing up to the waxing moon. Will nodded and showed Brian the business card Hannibal had given him.

Brian took it and cracked a smile.

“My, my, the Prince shacked you up with your own apartment. Touché for a douche…”, Brian slipped the card into his jacket pocket.

“Let’s get going, yeah?”

“Where…?”, the fledgling questioned as he was not entirely sure if Brian could be trusted. “I don’t even know you.”

“Think of me as your guardian angel, kid.”, the Brujah jested. “As for where we’re going, well, let’s just say where all kindred must go.”

“Come on.”

The man started to walk towards the street and Will followed him blindly. Will took in how Brian walked; proudly, but not obscenely proud. His walk was far different than Hannibal’s — rather, Brian walked with a purpose rather for show. Will caught glimpses of the few tattoos he could make out; a knife, a painted skull, and a bizarre ‘A’ shaped tattoo. Brian occasionally pointed out buildings or street corners as ‘safe spots’, but Will was affirmed to say he wouldn’t visit such shrouded venues.

After a while, Will had begun to feel parched. Brian had began chatting away about Baltimore, how long he’d been in the city, and the friends he’d met. Will didn’t want to interrupt him, or did he find his stories boring, but the thirst became ravenous each city block they crossed. Eventually, Will had stopped as they approached an overpass. From both sides of the street, different kinds of tents were pitched against sheets of fence while barrels were utilized into fireplaces. People of all sorts shuffled amongst themselves. Brian had took noticed and turned to look at the fledgling practically salivating.

“Don’t tell me…You hadn’t feed yet?”, Brian questioned. “Did the Prince not give you a sippy cup on the way out?”

Will hardly heard Brian as he became hypnotized by his cravings. He eyed down a much older, heftier woman walking further back from the encampment. She dressed warmly, but Will could see the wear and tear on her coat. She hacked nosily and grumbled something under her breath — completely unaware of Will’s presence. He stalked her on deft feet as they both were far gone from the lit braziers and shoddy tents.

The woman had begun to rummage through an unlocked donation box; pulling garment after garment out. Will watched and felt his gums tingle. He heard her slow, sluggish heartbeat thud around in his ears. Something urged him to leap at her, but to his better instincts, he watched from the shadows. The woman had turned around and caught of glimpse of Will staring at her. She wasn’t alarmed or startled by his presence, rather, she grimaced at him and continued her plundering.

Brian had sneaked up and squeezed Will’s shoulder. The fledgling tensed and gave Brian a sordid look. The man leaned uncomfortably close to Will’s ear.

“Don’t overdo it.”, Zeller warned, pointing to how the woman was hunched over her allotted treasures.

“It’s not *our* way.”

Our way.

Will brushed off Brian's hand and approached closer to the woman. He kneeled to where she had begun to sort the clothes she plundered. She looked at him, one of her eyes crusted over with greyish film, and gave him a cheeky smile. Will felt a prang of guilt for taking advantage of what appeared to be a gentle woman. Yet, the pounding heartbeat thudding in his ears aroused his hunger. Two, glistening fangs protruded from his gums as he leaned in closer to the woman.

"Just a little taste…", a little girl's voice mocked Will. "Just a little sweetie before dinner…"

His nose furled at the scent of musk, dirt, and sweat, but he continued to salivate as the heartbeat got louder. The woman noticed what he was doing and panicked; flailing out his reach. Will grabbed her by the shoulders and was soon atop of her — fangs dangerously close to her exposed neck. She yelled yet Will cut it short by puncturing the soft, wrinkled flesh of her neck.

The rush was instant.

Will tasted the blood sloshing in his mouth and down his throat. He greedily sucked and swallowed as the woman underneath him stopped fighting him. Her eyes bulged into round saucers. Her fists balled up onto his shoulders, then relaxed on his shirt, before collapsing to her sides. Will closed his eyes as the flavor nearly put him in a trance. He raised up to catch his breath or the lack of, but before he could lean down for another swallow, he was pulled away with a strong pair of hands. He was tossed aside and rolled across the pavement. Brian had been watching with stern, parental eyes.

Will looked up at him bewildered and bared his newly sprouted fangs. The older vampire bared his back and Will quickly retracted his own. Brian shook his head and went to the woman's side. He felt underneath her chin and sighed.

"Second lesson, don't *kill* the prey.", Brian warned, looking to how Will bristled.

The fledgling wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and didn't challenge Brian anymore. Instead, he regained a bit of his composure and eyed cautiously to where the street was. No one had heard him or the woman, thankfully, and Will licked his reddened lips. The taste was still tingling on his tongue and he made a mental note of how the woman tasted.

Sugary, like honeysuckle in spring.

The hunger had subsided, but Will secretly starved for more.

"You're a fast learner, aren't you?", Zeller commented.

Will nodded.

"You'll do great around here, kid."

The Brujah dragged the homeless woman's corpse further away from where they were. Will kept his fingers up to his lips as the taste still lingered pleasantly on them.

Brian and Will continued their nightly stroll through Baltimore as Will asked questions of all sorts. He asked about the Prince, his newfound senses, and about his new lifestyle. The older vampire answered any and all questions Will had, and the fledgling found himself warming up to him more. Eventually, they found the address written on the business card. It was a rather posh, renovated apartment with enough space to fit two people comfortably. The fledgling would explore later; he would rather sleep. Will took priority over the couch as he sprawled out over the plush cushions. Brian took a seat in an armchair.

“Welcome to Baltimore, kid.”, Zeller commented as he made himself comfortable. His eyes lid was just as heavy as Will’s.

Will cracked a smile and rolled over on the couch.

“Good night, Brian Zeller.”

Hannibal wasn’t a light sleeper or did he have trouble falling asleep, but this particular night left him restless. He had thought to listen to the crackling pops of his roaring fireplace to lull him to sleep, yet he found himself pacing back and forth across his expansive bedroom. He had begun to gnaw on his bottom lip, a pestering habit of his, and couldn’t take his mind off the trial.

He had conducted dozens of trials over his reign as the Prince of Baltimore, but his mind could not wander from Will Graham. Though he was fair faced, appealing to the eye, there was something about him Hannibal was fascinated by. From behind him, the blankets had begun to shift. A grove of blonde haired peeked from underneath as Bedelia, bare-faced and drowsy, had stared at Hannibal from across the room. Her expression softened as she stretched out her arm to gesture Hannibal to join her. He did so dutifully; crawling from the foot of the bed up into her embrace.

She smelled of sex and rosewater. Blissfully sensual in how she stroked Hannibal’s cheek, Bedelia had ushered Hannibal to lay beside her. She whispered sweet nothings to him as the Prince only purred to her ministrations.

“You’re restless.”, she commented. “You need your sleep.”

“You know me so well, Bedelia.”, Hannibal replied, taking her hand into one of his own. “But you don’t know my affliction as well as I do.”

Hannibal was a nocturnal creature; it was against his nature to be asleep on such nights. He indulged Bedelia whenever she slept, but he could never say he’d fall asleep. Rather, he listened to her breathe till the sun cascaded up the horizon.

She stopped massaging his face and retracted her arm. Bedelia propped herself up onto her elbows. She seemed to take offense at the sudden accusation. Hannibal, of course, meant no harm or chose to use such words. She gazed at Hannibal with her infamous, cynical glare. Hannibal mentally prepared for a verbal lashing, but to his own degree, Bedelia only ‘tsked’ at him.

“I’ve spent years with you, Hannibal.”, she began. “Seen you at your best and at your worst.”

“Don’t think I don’t know you.”

It was true. Bedelia had braved just as many cutthroats and would-be usurpers as Hannibal did. Out of all his associates, he trusted Bedelia the most while at the same time knowing her strengths and weaknesses. She hadn’t betrayed him, or have he betrayed her. Nor did she ask out her position, especially, her position as a human. The most peculiar note Hannibal had ever made about Bedelia was that she never asked once to become his progeny — or make notion she would like to join him in his cruel immortality.

Hannibal hadn’t even asked her did she believe in God.

Regardless, Bedelia was a useful asset and intellectual that was a rarity in Baltimore. Had she been bestowed the cruel fate of immortality, Hannibal feared she would become like the rest of the chattering chattel he was forced to smile and make merry towards. Their symbiotic relationship built on wealth, sex, and cunning. He could tell her his darkest, most guarded secrets and her lips would seal forever with such knowledge.

With this, however, he could not trust her or her sealed lips.

He was feeling excitement again. The kind of excitement that made the hairs on his neck curl, the kind that made his hands tremble, and the kind that kept him waiting on pins and needles. His mind once again had drifted over to the thought of the newest fledgling; Will Graham. As much as Hannibal had no sordid pleasure in overseeing trials involving sires and their childer, he hadn't felt such excitement or been intrigued over another vampire let alone a fledgling. The Camarilla, or what Hannibal called his ‘ball-and-chain’, would much rather have the sireless vampire culled but, Hannibal knew better.

Will Graham was special, just as special as any other vampire, but more unique than any vampire Hannibal had ever known. Malkavians were diamonds in the rough if one knew how to refine them correctly. Their power of foresight was well-sought over and Hannibal couldn’t pass the opportunity of having such a vampire in his circle. Hannibal desired the thrill of seeing what Will could do — regardless of the unspoken consequences. Will Graham could be the thread that unraveled what Hannibal, the vampires of Baltimore, and even the Camarilla knitted tightly.

How exciting that’d be. Hannibal curled his lips into a smile.

On the other hand, Hannibal desired to shape Will into the beautiful strumpet he imagined him as such. That’d be more exhilarating than plucking his wings too soon. In due time, Will would begin to trust him or Hannibal had liked to hope. Immortality was no easy avenue, but Hannibal had many years underneath him to refine Will.

Like a sire would to his own progeny, Hannibal saw himself in Will’s upbringing. Was it a perverted way of becoming a sire, Hannibal could not say, but he softened whenever his thoughts lead him to Will.

“I shouldn’t have doubted your loyalty, my love.”, Hannibal commented, leaning in to kiss Bedelia’s rosy cheek. “I think I’ll rest my mind for the evening.”

Bedelia sighed and shifted to her side of the bed. Hannibal pulled the duvet back and tucked himself in. He listened to Bedelia’s soft, deep breaths as he stared up at the ceiling. Baltimore was due for a change and Hannibal wished for Will to be such a change. With whispers of cursed ships and old enemies rousing, the Prince looked forward to the additional excitement.

He smiled and allowed his eyes to close.

He would dream of Will Graham.

Start Of A New Day

Chapter Summary

Will meets an associate of Hannibal's and is left to partake in a treasure hunt.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

III

“Start Of A New Day”

Will roused to the sound of a television humming nearby. He shifted and stretched his arms and legs out. The apartment was comfortably warm, but still Will found himself curling into his shirt. Nearby, Brian was in the kitchen, rummaging through the refrigerator. Will peeked over the couch to see the older man take out plastic pouches of red liquid; the same pouches he feasted on the night before in Mateo’s apartment. His mouth felt dry as he watched.

He took in Brian’s appearance in the light — He was a lot stockier up close. His bare, bulky arms were void of scars except for etched ink. His beard was well-groomed, but tinges of silver had started to forest through it. His brown-black hair slicked back behind his pointed ears glistened like oiled snakes. His best feature, in Will’s opinion, was how his lips seemed to pout even when he wasn’t smiling.

Will looked away as a blush crept across his cheeks. He chided himself for having such thoughts. Brian looked up from his plundering and smiled at the fledgling. Will felt even warmer and shielded his shame with a pillow. He picked up one of the plastic pouches and came to where Will bunkered underneath one of the sofa’s pillows. He dropped it into the fledgling’s lap.

“Rise and shine, kid.”, Brian greeted. “It’s a start of a new day.”

Will reluctantly pulled the pillow off his face and sat up. He picked up the plastic pouch and twisted off the cap from the straw. He took a sip, then a swallow, and the contents inside were greedily slurped. Will practically crushed the plastic pouch then disposed of it onto the glass coffee table. He glanced where Brian was putting his leather jacket back on. The older vampire took out his cigarette pack and again, lit another cigarette between his lips.

The fledgling wondered how Brian could smoke so many cigarettes, but the thought dissipated when he remembered that vampires were immortal — or at least immune from blackened lungs. He swung his feet over and sighed. His clothes felt sticky and clammy against his skin.

“I want to shower, if that’s alright?”, Will asked.

Brian shrugged his shoulders.

“We have all night, sunshine.”

Will got up to walk around the couch, into the elongated hallway, and towards a closed door. His hand gently wrapped around the knob and he pushed forward. Behind the door was a rather nice-looking bedroom; a large bed in the middle accompanied by matching nightstands and a dresser. In this room, there was a window obscured by a set of grey curtains. Will approached but to his surprise, the glass was tinted as dark as the curtains.

He thought back to what Brian had said about sunlight. Will drew the curtains back over the darkened pane. He turned around to examine the contents within the nearby dresser; a collection of different colored shirts and undergarments. He picked out what looked to be a sweater and matching briefs before noticing a closet on opposite side of the room. When he opened it, just about every color of pants and shoes he could’ve thought of to make into an outfit was inside. Again, he chose the first pair of pants and shoes he saw.

Outside of the bedroom was the bathroom; a meticulously decorated bathroom. The theme was greys and blacks — fitting for what was supposed to be a modern apartment. The fledgling could see a lot of Hannibal’s hand in the décor; everything was there for a purpose. His purpose, however, was abstract as Hannibal had warned he could dispose of him at any moment. Will bit his lip as he disrobed. Truly, he feared Hannibal and the reach of his influence.

No singular, ordinary person was referred to as a Prince unless it garnered such power. Only powerful people could get such a title, even more so if it came with seniority and undying loyalty. Will wondered if Hannibal could see him here, or if he had armed guards watching his every move, or the worst — was waiting for him to slip in any fashion so he’d had just cause to kill Will. It seemed so easy for the Prince to have his maker executed and Will didn’t think for a second he wouldn’t do the same to him.

He pushed thoughts of his own murder aside and stood naked. The cool tiles made his toes curl. He approached the shower and drew back the curtain. Will managed to work the knobs of the shower before stepping underneath the cooling, crisp spray of water. It was a welcoming coldness and Will basked in it. Eventually, he washed himself off and stepped out.

He dried off with a nearby towel and caught his reflection in the mirror. His face, still fleshy and pink, had started to appear sunken. His lips had reddened into a rich rouge-shade, but his eyes were the first thing he had noticed. He remembered them behind a light shade of blue with flecks of silver, but his right eye had become darker and outlined with gold. He leaned in closer and peeled his eyelid down. There wasn’t any bruising or blood yet, Will couldn’t help but note the change. He blinked but the color remained.

He dressed again and kept the towel over his shoulders. His hair dripped and stuck to his face as he rejoined Brian in the living room. The older vampire was entranced with a nightly news special broadcasted on the television. Will caught a brief glimpse of the nightly report; another murdered person found floating in the Chesapeake. The news reporter made note that

this wasn't the first body, or body part, to be found in recent weeks. Will wondered who the culprit could be.

"Your ride is downstairs.", Brian commented, kicking his dirtied boots onto the coffee table. "I'd get down there before he leaves again."

Will nodded and left the towel draped across the couch. His hair was still damp to the touch, but it would eventually dry itself out. Before he walked out the apartment, he took a glance back at Brian. He opened his lips to speak, but the words were exhausted into silence.

"I'll catch up with you later, kid."

The fledgling shut the door behind him. The hallway was eerily quiet as Will walked down the hallway towards the stairs. Each unit seemed to have its own distinctive flair; many of the doors sporting different colored welcoming mats or potted plants. Will made a note of his possible neighbors. He descended the flight of stairs and out to the foyer. From the glass doors, he could see the same bright yellow taxi from the previous night. He swallowed and walked outside.

The night was much cooler than usual. Will approached the taxi and gently rapped against the passenger window. The window rolled down to reveal a man looking directly at him from underneath his blackened sunglasses. Again, Will questioned why anyone would wear such dark frames at this time of night.

However, Will felt unnerved when the taxi driver eyed him down. His eyes were sinister, or better yet, malicious. Will smiled nervously and reached for the back door. He slipped inside and the driver glared at him from the rear-view mirror. His chest began to feel tight and he started to gnaw on the flesh of his inner cheek.

"Where to?", the driver asked, his tone hollow and haunting.

The words seemed to strangle in his throat. Will's bottom lip trembled as he couldn't find his words. As the driver stared him down, he mustered up the courage to reply.

"I don't know…", Will confessed as the cab was awakened by the turn of the key. Hannibal had only told him that their mutual associate was across the Chesapeake.

The driver smirked to reveal his own pair of fangs extending from his gums.

"I'll drive…if you figure out where you want to be taken, tell me.", the driver replied, beaming another look that made Will turn stone cold.

The driver started the idled engine of the cab and pulled off from the curb. The ride was a quiet one except for the occasional car zooming past. The fledgling thought to ask the cab driver to turn on the radio — anything to distract from the unsettling silence. As if his thoughts were read aloud, the cab driver turned the knob of said radio. Another nightly news broadcasting whispered from the speakers. Will tuned out most of what had been said, but the driver seemed attentive to the broadcast. Eventually, Will glanced to the driver again as they entered a much more bustling part of Baltimore.

“The Prince told me he’d already made the necessary arrangements.”, Will said.

The driver nodded and made a quick turn onto the expressway ramp. Will held his breath as the cab’s speed escalated into a furious pace. He was used to being a passenger with such fastidious drivers, but his anxiety had risen well beyond his comfort level. Thankfully, the cab driver took heed of his passenger’s concern and was able to slow the cab to a reasonable speed.

“You shouldn’t trust him or his word.”, the cab driver chided. “I’ve seen many like you on this path and the ending is always the same.”

Will swallowed.

“Then who should I trust, *Judas*?”, the fledgling questioned, looking to how the cab driver’s eyes narrowed behind the shrouded frames.

“Trust your own path, child of Malkav. Or your fate, like all kindred, will be your own demise.”, with that, the cab driver reached for the radio and turned it up louder, blocking any other attempt for Will to respond.

“Liar, liar, pants on fire.”, sung a shrill voice of a young girl. “Lynch him from a telephone wire…”

The cab driver pulled off the expressway into a rather lavish, more upscaled neighborhood far away from the deluge of the Chesapeake. Will hadn’t seen houses so big — they were thrice the size of any house he’d seen back home. In the dark of the night, it was clear that these estates housed the rich and powerful of Baltimore. The expansive lawns and expensive sports cars in every driveway reminded Will that he was an outsider — never to assimilate with the likes of them.

The cab pulled to a stop in the middle of the winding cul-de-sac. Will quickly unbuckled himself and exited the vehicle. He looked behind his shoulder to find the cab driver’s menacing, yellow eyes glued on him.

“Till our paths meet again, childe.”, the cab driver said, rolling up the window.

Will made a ‘hmph’ noise and walked up the cobbled driveway of the house. The sprinklers on the lawn had sprouted from the earthy graves and the young vampire had to sprint for dear life to the front door. Safe from the icy spray, Will gently rapped on the bright red door. He stood back and heard a series of footsteps echo from the other side. He was greeted by a rather young, attractive looking woman dressed in what Will could only describe as a pervert’s fantasy; a classic maid outfit. They looked at each other rather blankly; Will hadn’t expected someone dressed like her to answer the door.

“May I help you?”, she asked, her eyebrows furrowing.

“I’m here to meet Frederick Chilton…”, Will said, looking past the young woman to see a house illuminated in soft, yellow light. “I believe he’s expecting me.”

She nodded and stepped aside. Will stepped in and the light became warmth as the house smelled like cinnamon and fresh bread. It was a familiar smell; like what his Christmases used to be when he was a child. Will took in the exquisiteness of the house — the marble floors, chiseled columns, and the antique furniture. He was cautious not to misstep in fear of breaking something. The woman had disappeared up an elaborate flight of stairs as Will waited in the foyer. In a nearby mirror, he had noticed some of his curls obscuring his eyes. He did his best to pluck them behind his ears.

After all, this *Frederick Chilton* was supposedly an acquittance of the Prince.

The woman appeared again at the top of the stairs. She gestured for Will to meet her and the fledgling did as such. She led him down an immaculate hallway covered in paintings, vases, and the occasional fabergé egg collection. They stopped in front of large, indigo colored double doors. She took grasp of both handles and pulled, revealing an office space behind them. Will stepped inside.

He was met by the sight of an older gentlemen, younger than the Prince, standing by the large windows looking beyond the city's limits. He was much shorter than the Prince, now that Will sized him up, but his stance demanded respect. Will stood awkwardly in the middle of the office as the man had begun to talk amongst himself. He turned around to see Will eyeing him and stiffened.

"Ah, I didn't even hear you come in.", the man said, looking over at how Will stood. "Please, have a seat anywhere."

Will eyed an armchair in front of a rather large, deep-colored mahogany desk and he took a seat. He kept his hands down into his lap as the man soon joined him; sitting on the other side of the desk. He smiled warmly to Will and the fledgling only stared blank-faced.

"My name is Dr. Chilton. Frederick Chilton.", the man reached his hand out for a handshake.

Will shook his hand and took note of the warmth.

Alive.

"Will. Will Graham."

"Yes! Your Prince briefed me on who you are, Mr. Graham.", Frederick said, a tinge of glee behind his voice. "You are quite the talk around town."

Will didn't believe Dr. Chilton; he'd only been a vampire for a night. Unless it was some cruel, sick joke everyone was playing on him — He couldn't see himself at the center of anything.

He studied Chilton as the doctor began to ramble on about what Will could only describe as 'small talk'. He wasn't particularly handsome for Will's standards as his greyish hair revealed that in fact, he was much older than first initially perceived. His beard was coarse with thick, black hair and Will could see the doctor had wrinkles. His suit was just like Hannibal's; a

swirl of several different nauseating patterns. Even how Chilton sat, postured and upright, seemed like an imitation.

He had begun to wonder if Dr. Chilton truly knew who the Prince was, or better yet, what he was. Will noted Chilton's ease when it came to talk about the Prince — unlike Will, he seemed to practically praise Hannibal with every other sentence. He'd even mentioned how Hannibal threw him an exquisite, five-course dinner party in his honor a few nights prior. Dr. Chilton nearly giggled when he spoke of Hannibal and the fledgling listened idly. Will knew a kiss-ass when he smelled one and Dr. Chilton was the most foul-smelling one he'd come across.

"Enough of the chitchat. That's not what you're here for." Chilton suggested, looking over to the office door.

"You're here because *our* Prince ordered you."

Our Prince. Will felt like he could vomit. Could I still vomit?

"But first, a drink to our new mutual partnership."

He snapped his fingers and near instantly, the young woman that had let Will into the house had soon returned with a silver platter between her arms.

She curtly smiled to Will as she rushed over to where he and Dr. Chilton sat. She laid down a small cup of piping hot liquid near Chilton then a cup to Will. The fledgling watched a coil of smoke twirl into the air. He looked away as Chilton partook in his drink. The housemaid only waited with her eyes fixated on Dr. Chilton.

He made an audible 'ahh' as he returned the delicate cup onto it's platter before noticing Will hadn't reached for his own cup. He chuckled and gestured for his housemaid to pick up Will's cup. Cautiously, she reached for the cup — watching how Will's eyes followed her movements.

"I forgot. Your *kind* does not drink tea.", Dr. Chilton commented, pointing out Will's healing puncture marks. The fledgling took slight offense. He covered the marks with his hand.

My kind but our Prince.

The fledgling didn't know whether to be offended or not. However, Will's suspicions were right; Dr. Chilton wasn't a vampire, or at least, not an average human in some way. He could hear the doctor's heartbeat, steady and healthy, yet he could smell the faintest whiff of decay masked underneath cologne.

The housemaid curtsied and as she was about to leave the office, Chilton signaled for her to remain. Will's attention went to her heartbeat, rapid and scared, and it took an exertion of his willpower not to lunge for her. He turned away to look at Dr. Chilton's smug face.

"I would rather not…", Will stated. "I'm here on the Prince's accord and I await for your instructions, Doctor."

Dr. Chilton ‘tsked’ and shooed his housemaid, by all means, looked relieved.

“So polite.”, Chilton joked. “But you can’t force a horse to drink.”

Will did desire to partake in his thirst, but, he wouldn’t subject the poor housemaid to his hunger. He could only imagine what Dr. Chilton tortured her with.

He truly looked the type; perverted, sadistic, easy to anger. Will wouldn’t outright accuse him of such lewd acts but how Dr. Chilton unraveled the housemaid with his eyes was more than telling. Men like Chilton only left bruises and tears in their wake.

“Let’s address our business.”, Dr. Chilton eased back in his chair. “The task is rather simple; retrieve something that’d been stolen from me.”

Will raised an eyebrow.

“A special delivery of mine, hijacked by deviants, and God knows where the contents wounded up at.”, Chilton crinkled his nose.

“I wasn’t aware I was being conscripted into piratry, Doctor.”, Will retorted. “Quite a crime I would be committing...”

Chilton beamed at the fledgling’s sudden bluntness.

“Well, well…The Prince had picked out quite a feisty one, hm?”, the doctor’s expression became stern. “Retrieve what you can find of my delivery from the old Chesapeake docks and perhaps I won’t tell your Prince of your insubordination.”

A threat. Will crossed his arms. The hairs on his neck had begun to spike. The familiar, gnawing feeling throbbed at his gums. He could feel his fangs beginning to prickle his tongue. He would play along — for the moment, but he marked Dr. Chilton as someone not to be trusted. Will grimaced but did not counteract the doctor’s threat.

“What am I looking for?”, Will questioned, seeing how Dr. Chilton didn’t give him any pictures let alone an abstract idea on what to look for.

“It’ll be branded with my own personal emblem.”, Chilton revealed a thick, silver band tightened around his finger. The gems punctured into the band were emeralds and topazes, nothing Will would’ve imagine he’d see in real life, and Dr. Chilton seemed to revel in Will’s innate curiosity. The crown of the ring, however, what looked to be an insignia — a bloodhound. Will made mental note of it as Chilton withdrew his hand.

“I’d get to it, Mr. Graham.”, Chilton rose from the other side of the desk. “You’re on borrowed time.”

He waltzed over to his large windowpane and gazed over the horizon of the city. Will was tempted to grab Chilton by his snobby, pretentious shoulders and throw him out said window, but a voice had warned him to heed his actions. Instead, he gathered himself out and deftly left the office.

The housemaid was downstairs; tending to the wafting aroma of cinnamon escaping from the kitchen. Their eyes met though Will didn't linger. He let himself out. He shoved his hands into his pockets and bit back a snarl.

Dr. Chilton was infuriating, more so on how cocky he was, and the lack of self-awareness he exhibited was nauseating. Will had met personalities of all types, but nothing irked him more than people like Frederick Chilton. He walked to the sidewalk void of persons and sat at its edge. He ran his hand through his curls and sighed.

He wanted nothing more to go back to sleep, but it seemed like this lifestyle meant he'd wander the streets till his legs could not compel him otherwise. He thought of other things; his parents, specifically. He doubted if a missing person report would be filed for him — seemed like his parents never cared before. It did gnaw at him that eventually; he'd outlive his parents. He held no malice towards them yet, he felt tears well in his eyes.

I hope they'll forgive me. A tear blotched with a tinge of red trailed down his cheek. He wiped with his finger pad and scolded himself. How ridiculous he must've looked right now. He wiped his other eye and a swift breeze behind him made him tense.

"Good evening, kid.", the familiar, husky voice of Brian purred behind him. Will threw his head over his shoulder to see Brian, once again, standing with another half-smoked cigarette dangling between his lips. He relaxed as Brian soon joined him back down on the curb.

"You truly are an apparition.", Will commented as Brian settled onto the sidewalk.

The Brujah scoffed.

"I'll teach you that too."

Will nodded.

Brian looked at the neighborhood around them and whistled.

"Only rich pricks live like this.", he commented, pointing out the individual houses. "To think I would've killed to live here."

Will raised his eyebrow.

"Do you not want to live like they do?", he asked Brian, seeing how the older vampire seemed to be offended by the amount of wealth around them.

"*Fuck* the rich, kid. They haven't done the world any good.", with that, Brian threw his cigarette onto the asphalt. It curled inwards as it burned. Brian slicked his hair back. He softened his irritated expression as the fledgling looked at him wide-eyed.

"Sorry. Mom never made me eat soap.", he joked.

The corners of Will's lips turned up into a smile, then a snicker, and finally into laughter. Brian smiled cheekily and went back to staring at the houses. They sat in momentary silence,

but it was soon broken by the familiar headlights of the taxi crawling down the street. They both stood as the cab idled nearby.

“Who’d you meet inside that fancy ass house?”, Zeller questioned as he and Will walked to the cab.

Will rolled his eyes.

“Dr. Chilton…Or at least that’s what the voices told me to call him.”, Will replied.

The Brujah took a sharp inhale.

“Listen, kid.”, Brian warned, opening the passenger door for Will to slip inside. “Chilton is just another ass-kisser. I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could piss.”

Point taken. Will didn’t need to be told twice not to trust Dr. Chilton. Brian joined him inside as the cab driver from before hauntingly stared at the both of them from the rear-view mirror. Brian seemed to be more agitated the driver and started to swear in the not so foreign language Will had heard last night. The driver only responded with a smirk and drove them away from the cul-de-sac. It was a rather easy voyage this time given that Brian was with him.

The older Brujah seemed fearless, or at least, extremely headstrong and that gave Will a sense of comfort. He would bark directions to the cab driver and dutifully, the cab driver guided the vessel in accordance. Brian knew the city — surely as the Brujah made clear distinctions of what streets Will should and should not walk alone on. Will was an excellent listener; retaining much of what Brian said and repeating it back to him.

The cab driver let them out near a run-down, horrid looking section of Baltimore. Factories, some decrepit while others functional, surrounded them on both sides. Brian took initiative and kept near Will and the fledgling appreciated the gesture. Nearby, another encampment of persons huddled around their shoddy braziers and makeshift palaces. The Chesapeake was nearby; her waters murky and tinted grey. Will covered his nose; the smell was unsettling.

The vampires walked together where the dock had begun to reach out onto the Chesapeake. It wasn’t the first or last of the Chesapeake’s many shipyards — This happened to be one of the forgotten ones. Will could’ve imagined that this was a bustling hub of trade and travel, but the remnants were the tell-tale reminders of a former time. Brian had ignited another cigarette as the moon hanged high in the sky.

Ships of all sizes, each holding their own prestige or lack of, docked along bay. Many of the ships looked to be commercial; their expansive decks holding equally expansive containers. The fledgling could only assume that the docks were used under secrecy given as there were far more hospitable places for ships to yield their bounties.

Will took notice of the lack of security, but he stopped right as the faint glimmer of a flashlight came to view. Both he and Bryan ducked behind a guard’s post. The flashlight came closer yet, it turned around and glimmered in the other direction. After a few moments,

Brian crept towards the largest of the ships; a great, red container ship infamously named the “Titantic”.

Either it was a cruel jest at a tragedy, or someone’s stale humor.

Will wasn’t far behind as Brian gestured him to join him in boarding the large container ship. Upon the deck, several different containers of various colors became a maze before them. Brian grumbled something underneath his breath as he kept a keen eye for any returning flashlights.

"We’ll be here all night...”, Will commented, pointing out the rows upon rows of containers.

“Fuck.”, Brian replied, noticing the flashlight making another round again. “How the fuck are we supposed to find whatever that prick wants?”

“Look for a bloodhound.”, the fledgling announced, pointing to the lettering on the container in front of them. “Or any kind of dog, I don’t care...”

Brian rolled his eyes and disappeared around a corner. Will took it upon himself to keep the flashlight’s wandering light in his peripheral. There were many ships here and Will was sure they wouldn’t find what Dr. Chilton had lost. Had this shipment been so important to the doctor — Will questioned why he hadn’t taken such precautions to secure it. Better yet, was Dr. Chilton sure his shipment could be recovered?

Like all treasures, some just can’t be found.

Chapter End Notes

See you next update.

The Arrival

Chapter Summary

A strange artifact arrives on the shores of Baltimore as Brian and Will find what Chilton is looking for.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for descriptions of human trafficking and gore. Please continue with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

IV

"The Arrival"

A crowd had already convened as Jack pulled the Bentley to a stop inside a nearby parking structure. A rambunctious group of journalists, news reporters, and wandering eyes hungered for a glance, or just any scrap they could get. Their curiosity was expected, but Hannibal was not in the mood to be seen. He sat in the backseat of the Bentley for quite a time as Jack guarded said vehicle from the outside. The Prince pinched the bridge of his nose and hissed under his breath.

The people outside, or what Hannibal thought of them as the entourage, would swarm upon him as he too was a bit of a celebrity. To say the least, he was an esteemed socialite within Baltimore. He was a patron of the arts, especially, the vocalized crescendos of many an opera. He was invited to every dinner party hosted by anyone with somewhat of an importance though he didn't partake in the food. Many a gallery in Baltimore was dedicated to him and his philanthropy. His presence would surely attract their attention, but the true sight was just beyond the yellow tape.

Hannibal was escorted by Jack from the parking structure to the edge of the growing crowd. Few people took notice of his appearance while others silently acknowledged his presence, but their eyes were affixed on something more exciting. He listened to their conversations; rather, their speculations and concerns. He watched shipyard workers and the police alike abate the crowd, but as news reporters flocked in closer — it was a useless attempt at crowd-control. In situations like this, Hannibal would've opted for a use of force. Yet, he was a civil man and the last thing the crowd needed was provoked mania.

The shipyard was a sight to behold. Blood and gore painted the water-rotted floorboards of the pier. Entrails had hung suspended like ensanguined streamers. Hannibal was sure he spotted a disemboweled torso impaled onto a light post. As nauseating as the sight was, Hannibal's interest locked onto a rather magnificent vessel. It was much older than the ships that made the shipyard their resting destination. Said vessel was an anticipated arrival to Baltimore though her entrance was a bloody one. It reminded the Prince of an older, more refined century, long past and forgotten. More policemen circled the crowd to diminish their excitement, but it was all in vain as a procession of bodies had begun to be wheeled off from the vessel's deck.

Hannibal watched the crowd stiffen as the bodies were wheeled into their respective hearses. He could smell the fear in the air, and it was pleasant. However, the bodies that passed did not reek of death or blood. He eyed the last one being placed within a coroner's van and scowled.

Something's not right. The Prince ushered for Jack to retrieve the Bentley. Hannibal had killed many humans and non-humans alike, but it was all the same; the smell of death was particular. He bristled.

He suspected foul play, as many in the crowd would've but, a massacre of this magnitude meant far other powers were at work. Necromancy was the first of Hannibal's suspicions, but he cleared that possibility given the bodies were still rather in a dead state. His worst suspicion — magic far beyond Baltimore, a kind of magic that made his insides squirm, and magic only the worst kinds of vampires possessed.

Hannibal caught a glimpse of Jack parking the Bentley on the other side of the street far away from hovering policemen and reporters. He left the crowd to their feast of the massacre and as he approached the vehicle, he was whistled at from across the sidewalk. It was a vulgar attempt to get his attention, but his eyes narrowed to a lone figure staring at him.

Hannibal pursed his lips. The figure approached, now recognizable by the badge strapped on his breast, and piece holstered onto a belt. The Prince knew of this man, rather, he was solely responsible for the foulness between them.

He was officer Tobias Budge, formerly, and Hannibal only held contempt towards him. He was arrogant, even for a mortal, and even more so with that badge on his breast. Office Budge dressed in plainclothes to disguise himself within the crowd, but Hannibal saw the distinguishable cello tattoo inked onto his darkened skin.

"Officer Budge.", Hannibal acknowledged, cupping his hands together. "Always a pleasure to see you."

A bold-face lie; Hannibal couldn't stand the ex-officer's guts.

The ex-officer's lips stretched into a rather cynical scowl as he eyed Hannibal up and down. Hannibal tilted his chin upwards as the officer inspected him; he adored the attention. How couldn't he? Hannibal thought of himself as a rather immaculate specimen of pedigree and refinement.

Once done with his thorough inspection, the ex-officer approached closer to Hannibal. The Prince smelled the staleness of his clothes, the cigarette buds smashed in his pockets, and arrogance on Officer Budge. He politely took a step back, but that only granted the ex-officer to advance.

Slightly annoyed, Hannibal became glass-faced and kept his smirk pleasant.

He would laugh if he hadn't thought of it as a rude gesture. Their history was a scornful, thorny tale of rivalry. Hannibal took great pleasure in disgracing the former officer, but even more at how hard Tobias tried to undermine him. It became rather comical to watch Officer Budge try to undermine his every move.

In fact, it was *hysterical*.

"I knew you wouldn't be able to resist.", the ex-officer accused, pointing back to the viscera of the shipyard.

Hannibal's lips curled into a wider smile as he brushed off the officer's attempt to incriminate him. This wasn't his work or would he do something so ill-willed and sloppy. He did, however, give the officer the benefit of the doubt. Jack had joined them and ushered for Officer Budge to take a step back, but the man did not budge. Instead, he took a step closer which prompted Hannibal to instinctively stiffen.

Bold. Hannibal felt himself steel as Jack and the officer sized one another. If Tobias Budge was anything, he wasn't a coward.

"I know what you are, Hannibal Lecter.", the ex-officer said, his tone lowering into a deep, husky tone. "Don't think you can do whatever you like…"

Hannibal leaned in close enough where he could hear the officer's heart drum from his neck. The officer tensed as a hand began to slip to where his gun was holstered. The Prince inhaled, exhaled, and then equipped his fangs. Two, elongated fangs lingered dangerously close to Tobias's neck as Hannibal watched the crowd begin to disperse and the coroner vans began to depart.

"I wouldn't dare, Officer Budge. After all, Baltimore is under your watchful eye."

Hannibal was a cruel jester. Truly, Tobias no longer had jurisdiction in Baltimore. His suspension, which Hannibal had meticulously crafted, revoked all his privileges except desk duty. Hannibal would've liked to think the ex-officer would've known his limitations, but alas, Tobias was all bark and none of the bite.

And shall he bite, Hannibal would put him down without a thought.

"Come again?", the officer threatened. "I didn't hear Your Majesty."

It was a matter of power. Tobias was more than capable of shooting Hannibal as much as Hannibal was capable to rip his throat open, but they both exerted their restraint. A mortal's bullet wouldn't kill Hannibal, but he would rather not attract the attention of a gunshot.

Hannibal heard the click of the safety being pulled and his fangs began to prick the skin. He tasted the sweat and foul cologne on the skin. The gun pressed harder into his stomach. The sound of a helicopter's blades slicing the night's air disengaged them. Hannibal slid his fangs back into his gums as Officer Budge clicked his safety back on. The two adversaries stared each other down, but it was Hannibal who broke the eye contact. He turned away as Jack shielded him. He entered the Bentley and Jack soon joined him.

Hannibal rolled down the tinted window and gave Tobias one last look over.

"Keep up the good work, *officer*.", Hannibal jested, rolling the window back up.

Jack brought the car into drive and Officer Budge was nothing more than a fading blotch in the rear-view mirror. As insufferable as that encounter was, it left Hannibal feeling tingly. He was used to others practically throwing themselves at his feet that it was rejuvenating to have someone challenge his authority. In due time, he would eventually rid Tobias from his hairs, but till then — he was satisfied with tormenting him.

However, he tingled for a pleasure more carnal — A romantic endeavor for sure.

He ushered for Jack to drive to a familiar neighborhood of Baltimore. The manses decorating both sides of the street became more expansive as it curved towards a cul-de-sac. Jack pulled the Bentley in front of a familiar white estate and Hannibal let himself out. Up the paved pathway, he was greeted by a procession of motion lights illuminating his arrival. The wide, red doors swung open as Bedelia stood in the doorway, tired-eyed but ravishing.

Her blonde hair swept down her shoulders as Hannibal took in the sight of her. She was flattered, but more annoyed at his late arrival.

"You kept me up.", she accused. "I don't like to wait."

Hannibal nodded.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Du Maurier.", he watched as Bedelia leaned against the doorframe. "May I join you, my queen of the night?"

She contemplated for a moment, perhaps thinking to shut Hannibal out in the cold, or whether to invite him into her home. Hannibal stood in all his glory, but humbled himself in her presence. She sucked in her teeth and stepped aside.

"Always, my prince of darkness."

Bedelia smiled and tucked her hair behind her ears. She gave Hannibal a long look as the Prince beamed in victory. Hannibal thanked her for the invite as he caressed her hand into his own. He looked over his shoulder to find Jack parking the Bentley into Bedelia's driveway rather than the street. The door closed behind them both as arms wrapped around one another and lips sealed a kiss.

Utterly exhausted and quite annoyed, Will and Brian forced open the last of the many shipping containers they had plundered through. Inside, they were met with what every other container before it had; nothing. Brian angrily kicked the wall of the container as Will pinched the bridge of his nose.

Many hours had passed and their chance of finding anything remotely close to what Chilton had described was slim to nothing. In fact, the fledgling was starting to believe that this all had been a fool's errand. Will crouched down to regain himself and Brian dug out another cigarette. They were both equally frustrated, but as Will spent more time with the Brujah, he found out that said Brujah had more of a temper than anyone he'd ever met.

Brian was, in the least amount of words, straight-edged and abrasive. His style, his mannerisms, even his reactions were cut from the jagged, punk-rock cloth Will had been warned to stay away from. It was an attractive style and Will studied Brian from every angle. Sheepishly, he averted his gaze elsewhere.

The Brujah looked over to where the fledgling crouched and offered his cigarette, but the fledgling denied it.

"We haven't found a dog's head, a cow's head, or *fuck* — not even a goat's head.", Brian fumed, pointing angrily at the contents around them. "I'm sick of this."

Will nodded and listened to the choppy waves of the Chesapeake lap against the side of the barge they were on. Brian joined him.

They sat in rather comfortable silence, but Will couldn't help but to say something.

"Brian.", he started, looking to the Brujah with softening eyes. "We have to keep looking."

The Brujah glanced at the fledgling and scoffed. His nostrils flared and he took a deep inhale of his cigarette. Will pressed his lips together and looked away. Nothing was more frustrating than a fool's errand, but what more could they do?

The fledgling rose up and took another longing glance over the ship's deck. They would have to visit another ship before sunrise. Brian flicked his shortened cigarette to the side and brushed past Will, walking towards the other side of the ship, and the fledgling went the opposite direction.

His legs burned with overuse as his eyes felt heavy with drowsiness. He wasn't attuned to his nocturnal lifestyle and with every step, he felt himself growing lethargic. A throbbing migraine dulled his frazzled senses as the many words and patterns on the shipping containers became a garbled mess. He felt tendrils crawling up and down his spine, wrapping against the base of his skull, and digging deep into the flesh. His chest tightened. Beads of sweat dotted along his brow and is fingers had begun to itch.

"Gold eyes, bright eyes, shiny eyes.", an eerie whisper curled the cusp of his ear. "No eyes."

He stopped and squeezed his eyes tightly; the feelings subsiding.

His breath hitched when he saw the beam of a flashlight crossing his vision. He quickly ducked behind a container as the flashlight came closer. He glanced behind him to see Brian gone and anxiousness flooded in. The flashlight stopped and surveyed across the deck before turning around. Will eyed as a rather bulky security guard shuffled away and he snuck to another container. As he leaned around to check his blind spot, another beam appeared much closer.

Frozen, Wil stared doe-eyed into the beam. Caught off guard, the other security guard squawked which instinctively made Will bristle. He slammed his back against the shipping container and squeezed his eyes shut. He balled his fists so tightly that his nails drew blood into his palms. He didn't know whether to run or scream for Brian, but he held his breath as the flashlight came around the corner.

"You can't see me...", a young, shrill voice of a boy mocked him. "Hide and seek…"

To his surprise, the flashlight rushed by him as the security guard barked for his companion rather than intercept Will. The fledgling opened his eyes to find that the security guard had become oblivious to his presence as if the guard had never spotted him. He swallowed and unfurled his hands. He held his breath and eased himself away from the container. He stepped lightly, cautious not to put too much weight down, and stalked around the security guard.

Again, the security guard was ignorant of Will's lingering presence as he was joined by his companion. They spoke frantically with one another and the chatter of their radios sounding like humming wasps to the fledgling. Will made distance between the guards and crept away. Once he was far enough, he slid behind another container and exhaled.

"I can't believe I just done that…", he told himself, peeking at the security guards feet away from him. He looked back towards the end of the ship to see Brian holding eye contact with him. The Brujah pointed towards the docks and disappeared around a container. Will swallowed but braced himself to bolt across the deck to follow the Brujah.

Once the security guards turned their backs to Will, the fledgling zoomed as fast as he could. He hardly felt his feet dash across the ship deck, but he caught a glimpse of the Brujah vaulting over the ship's side and onto the dock. It was like watching a bird in flight; the Brujah landed as gracefully as he flew. Will hardly saw the other vampire jump as the flashlight beams casted their watchful eyes towards him once again. Brian ushered for him to jump and the fledgling did — his whole body vaulting forward to the planks below him.

His landing was rather clumsy and he stumbled. Brian caught him by the crook of arm and braced him. Will exhaled and gathered his footing. The Brujah released him and the fledgling thanked him.

"We have to go.", the Brujah said, pointing to the frantic beams of flashlights. "At least from here."

Will nodded and followed Brian to the other side of the dock. From this side, only a pearl-white yacht with blue trimming was docked. The long body stretched far across the Chesapeake and Will counted at least two decks. It was rather odd to see such a ship here in a sketchy part of Baltimore, but nonetheless, the vampires approached. Will saw a small,

painted decal of the bloodhound Dr. Chilton mentioned. He pointed it out to Brian and the Brujah nearly screamed in victory.

They boarded and Brian scoped around. Will crept along the ship and approached the lower deck. His hand curved into the groove of the sliding door and he pulled gently.

The door slid and inside, the interior was darkened save for the few streaks of moonlight coming through the windows. Will stepped down into the lower deck and scanned what little he could see in the absolute darkness.

“Can’t see, can’t see! Where have my eyes gone to?”, worried voices chattered across Will’s mindscape.

The fledgling silenced his anxious voices by biting down on his cheek. He felt along the wall as he tip-toed and eventually felt a light. He moved it up with his finger to illuminate his surroundings.

The lower deck was immaculate; fully furnished and pristine. Will was impressed to say the least, but he heard Brian hiss at him from above the deck. He lowered the lights till darkness enveloped the décor. Will had to trust his eyes and ears but that proved to be a challenge when all his ears buzzed with white noise. His eyes were no better as apparitions not real made themselves real.

He was close to another door and as he reached to open it, something shuffling behind it made Will bristle.

He took a step back and felt his fangs slide from his gums. The hairs on his neck and arms stood at full attention as the shuffling became loud clattering. Brian had taken notice and joined the fledgling in the dark — his steel eyes glowing nearly white in the darkness. The Brujah ushered for the fledgling to step back as he too reached for the door. Will held his breath as the door was slid back.

Even in the darkness, Will could make out two figures huddled together. Brian hissed as soft, muted whimpers grew into shrill cries. The fledgling was the first to swat his hand to a light switch and the lower deck was met once again with warm, orange light. Inside the cramped bathroom was two women only clothed in their naturalness. Their bewildered states startled the vampires who, both naturally bared their fangs, hissed at them both. The women inside screamed at their feral display, but it was Will that was first to sheathe his canines. Brian took a step back and shielded his mouth with the back of his hand.

They looked scared, more so at their discovery, and Will stood frozen. They were feeble-like; the dark-haired woman closer to the vampires looking frail and malnourished. She was cusping her younger companion tightly to her own skeletal frame. The women’s lips moved, but only indistinguishable vowels escaped from them.

“What the fuck is this!”, Brian growled, disgust rolling off his tongue. “What the fuck is Chilton into?”

Mortified at the scene in front of him, Will swallowed his disgust. They were terrified, just as he was last night, and it left goosebumps on his skin. They couldn't even speak as Brian turned his gaze away and mumbled something under his breath. Will had to excuse himself as he walked back to the upper deck to dry heave over the side.

It was a special delivery indeed — *human* cargo. Will had many ideas what the delivery could've been, but he did not expect live human cargo. Drugs, illegal weapons, hell, even exotic animals could've been saner than two women, nude and afraid. He imagined only the worst outcomes for them as his stomach churned from his heaving. What Dr. Chilton trafficked them for, Will didn't want to think about, but it would've been incredibly cruel to leave them for him.

His chest burned from his dry heaving as he looked up towards the factories. In the distant, he could hear vehicles approaching and he quickly gathered himself. He rushed back to the lower deck to see the two women fleeing from their imprisonment. The vampires wasn't going to stop them either. Brian must've heard the vehicles as well because he raced up to the deck in record time.

"We need to go, kid.", the Brujah said, seeing the vehicles turning off the street and onto the asphalt. "This is a party we aren't invited to."

"We can't just leave them.", Will pointed to where the two women had stopped. They stared at Will with empty, sullen eyes and the fledgling turned away. "The flesh-peddler will auction them."

Brian pinched the bridge of his nose and snarled under his breath.

"Kid, *fuck* Chilton.", he pointed to where the vehicles now parked; three pitch-black SUVs. "We're leaving."

The Brujah grabbed Will's hand and pulled him away much to the fledgling's protests. Back on the upper deck, several persons exited the SUVs and met the vampires with guns drawn. They were armored in vests. Their expressions steeled, but Will saw how their fingers nervously curved around the triggers. A miasma of anxiety wafted in the air as Will saw past the their tough-guy façade. He heard their heartbeats, erratic and disruptive, and could smell the faintest taint of dread.

Will unsheathed his fangs as the armed men approached.

Brian shielded the fledgling behind him as the guns aimed deadly close to their hearts. The fledgling melded his body into Brian's back and he kept his glare towards their attackers.

"I got you, kid.", he heard Brian murmur. "I won't let them get you."

As comforting that was to hear, Will didn't look forward to being a shooting target. As the guns were pointed at them, they were disengaged by a commanding presence. Will opened his eyes to Dr. Chilton standing in front of his armed posse with a shit-eating smirk Will wanted nothing more to wipe off his face. He felt the angry, boiling heat emit from Brian as

the Brujah nearly combusted in rage. However, the fledgling gripped him tightly so that he couldn't rush towards Dr. Chilton.

"Well, well.", Dr. Chilton said, his smirk lessening. "Paint me impressed."

Will loosened his grip on Brian as he now stood beside the Brujah and becoming equally irate at their employer. The doctor had redressed into a tan and mauve suit, but it was as equally ugly as the one Will met him in. Chilton waved his guards back and they complied dutifully. However, their heartbeats did not calm rather heightened in vibrato.

"How did you find us?", Will questioned. "Were you watching us this entire time?"

Chilton scoffed.

"Of course I was, William.", that made the fledgling squirm. "I told you I needed to find my delivery."

"A delivery of flesh and torture.", the fledgling accused. "Aren't you such a saint."

Dr. Chilton's brows tightened, and his smirk became a deep, offended scowl.

I've struck a nerve.

Will's own frown became tight and Brian was shaking in how angry he'd become.

"Careful, *vampire*.", Chilton warned, one of his guards raising his gun again. "Don't seek higher than your station."

"You can eat shit for all I care, asshole.", Brian argued. "We're done here."

Dr. Chilton shifted his eyes to the Brujah and his brows curled into a cynical arch. He crossed his arms and examined Brian from head-to-toe.

"I don't know you, but I can tell you're a riot.", Chilton jested. "But alas, our business is done here."

Dr. Chilton ushered for his armed entourage to embark onto the yacht and Brian vaulted over her side, landing deftly onto the docks in front of Chilton. The entourage locked their sights onto Brian, but Will joined his companion with bared fangs. Chilton, seemingly unsurprised and unbothered by the sudden show, only scoffed and urged his guards onto the vessel. The Brujah practically loomed over Dr. Chilton as his jaw was clenched so tightly, Will could trace out his nerves.

"You are one sick bastard, you know that?", the Brujah accused, grabbing a fistful of Chilton's suit in his hand.

The doctor scoffed and slapped Brian's hand away from him. He pressed out the wrinkles in his suit and he shot a stern glance to Will. The fledgling frowned.

“Your friend here is awfully rude, William.”, he commented, stepping aside from Brian to stand in front of Will. “I’d advise you to find better company.”

“He’s much better company than some people I’ve met.”, Will retorted, eyeing Chilton down with a tinge of cynicism. “Far better.”

Chilton rolled his eyes and dug into his suit. In his hand was a thick, white envelope signed with Will’s name. He held it out with his nose slightly lifted in the air. The fledgling shot a glance to Brian who was undeniably furious, but the Brujah huffed and crossed his arms. Will took that as a ‘yes’ as he reached for the envelope in Chilton’s hand. Before Will could grasp it, it suddenly fell from Chilton’s fingers and the doctor chirped.

“My apologies.”, the doctor said, his tone insincere and mocking. “It slipped.”

Will inhaled, exhaled, and hissed under his breath. He looked at the envelope down on the concrete and against everything that urged him to rip Chilton to shreds — He suppressed the urge by smiling politely, reaching down for the envelope, and sliding it into his waistband. Brian, on the other hand, fumed at the disrespect, but didn’t say a word. From behind them, the armed entourage escorted the two women — now dressed and zip-tied, and Will scowled. Chilton gave one last longing glare at both vampires before he turned his back to them.

Before he entered the SUV again, he looked over to his shoulder to Will.

“I’ll give our Prince my thanks.”, he commented. “We’ll be in touch.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”, Will lied, but too exhausted to battle Chilton any further. The armed entourage loaded their captives into another SUV and they too got into their respective vehicles. As quickly as the SUVs appeared into the lot, they disappeared back towards civilization.

Brian came to Will’s side as the fledgling sighed. The Brujah took notice of the fledgling’s exhaustion and instinctively wrapped an arm around him. Will rested his head on the Brujah’s shoulder as the vampires stood for a moment. He could smell the tobacco clinging to Brian like a shroud, but it was a pleasant and welcoming scent. They untangled themselves from one another and Will retrieved the envelope from his waistband. He haphazardly sliced it with his fingernail, and it revealed a rather hefty bounty of dollars inside.

Will counted them meticulously while Brian watched with interest. There was more than enough than Will had ever made soliciting the streets. He hadn’t expected to be paid or was sure what to do with it. Hannibal didn’t say anything about giving him the money, but Brian took about three one-hundred-dollar bills from the bundle. He slipped it into his jacket pocket and winked at the fledgling.

“For all the shit he’s put us through tonight, the least he could do is pay us.”, said Brian, justifying the still thick bundle of cash in Will’s hand.

ill shrugged his shoulders and handed the cash to Brujah and he stuffed it into his jacket pocket. The fledgling began to walk off into the night and Brian trailed behind him. To say he was tired was an understatement; he was drained. Physically, he was managing to cope with the tiredness, but emotionally, he was frazzled. He's been introduced to cruelty by many types of men, but he couldn't shake the two women out of his psyche.

Chilton was going to abuse them, or sell them to someone equally as cruel, and Will didn't know whether to be angry or unfeeling. Those two women couldn't have been the only ones Dr. Chilton stolen or wouldn't be the last and Will comforted himself on that notion. As terrible as the world was, if he wallowed in the despair, it would eat him alive. Brian caught up to him and wrapped his bulky arm around him as they walked. He brought the fledgling close and had began to ramble on about what they could use the money for.

Will was happy that Brian was no longer foaming at the mouth. The Brujah talked on and on about a specific motorcycle he's wanted since he was a child but wasn't sure if they still made them. The fledgling dutifully listened — it was calming to listen to Brian rather than his rambling mind. They walked most of the way, but it was Will who hailed a cab the moment they reached civilization again. They made it back to the apartment with aching feet and tired eyes. Will was the first, once again, to peel out of his clothes and onto the couch. He hadn't even given thought to sleeping in the back bedroom. Brian, however, jumped at the offer of the bed and wished the fledgling a goodnight following a quick shower.

Will made himself as comfortable as he could on the couch and closed his eyes. He would much rather have a peaceful, dreamless sleep but his alter egos wouldn't give him that comfort. Instead, he would dream of a better time, far from Baltimore, and far from home.

Chapter End Notes

I just think Brian is neat. :)

Again, see you next update.

Hemoglobin

Chapter Summary

New bodies wash up in Chesapeake, Chilton is attacked, and Will meets with Hannibal for the first time.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for descriptions of violence. Please continue with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

V
“Hemoglobin”

He was awake. Will felt the aches of the previous night embedded deep into his sore muscles. The television nearby was on, but the volume was muted. He rose up off the couch to find Brian in the kitchen, his bare back turned to the fledgling. Will scanned the apartment to find it still relatively same, save for the mess that began to accumulate on the kitchen counter tops, but nonetheless the same. He rubbed the sleep away from his eyes and got up. He paced towards the bathroom.

The cold water on his face woke him up, but it was the warmth of the shower that roused his aching body. His hair dripped wet on his shoulders as he wrapped the towel around his naked self. He heard Brian presumably on the phone, but it was merely an echo in the bathroom. He walked back to the bedroom to find another set of clean clothes. The alarm clock nearby read a quarter after seven in the evening. He must’ve woken up early, but Brian was most likely up far earlier. When Will came back into the living room, Brian was zipping up his jacket. His hair was disheveled, and his eyes blackened from smudged eyeliner.

Will parted his lips to question Brian’s sudden alertness but closed them once he found the Brujah looking at him.

“You’re awake.”, the Brujah greeted, coming from around the island counter and giving the fledgling a pat on his wet curls. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

Will shook his head and eyed the Brujah carefully. The man was still exhausted, but he wasn’t letting it show. He didn’t ask why Brian was up earlier than he was, but perhaps he was just as restless as Will. The fledgling turned to look back at the muted television now

showing a breaking news report. He sat back down on the couch as Brian came over to sit on the arm. The Brujah found the remote to raise the television's volume.

"…In other news, another mutilated body has been discovered beached on the banks of the Chesapeake river.", the news reporter announced with a suspicious tinge of excitement behind her voice.

The next picture was a ghastly one — an eviscerated body strewn across the sandy banks of the river hardly blurred. Will could only make out a torso, but it disgusted him so much that he had to turn away. Brian, however, seemed unfazed as the news reporter continued to cover the excruciatingly, bloody details of the crime. The news flashed another equally morbid scene of another mutilated body hanging in what appeared to be a run-down building, but it was thankfully blurred.

"The victim has been identified as 23-year old Andrew Sharper of Rockville that had been missing for several weeks. He was reportedly supposed to have started his first semester of university, according to his worried parents, but was later reported missing a couple weeks prior to the discovery of his body.", the news reporter continued her coverage on the story, seemingly blank-faced and unfeeling towards the graphic details.

Again, Will shielded his eyes from the viscera as the report turned back to the gore on the Chesapeake shore. It was disgusting, if not horrible to have such a murder broadcasted so liberally. Will was never squeamish or frightened so easily, but it was the last thing he had wanted to see upon waking up. Rather, he hadn't processed his sire's beheading and the news broadcast relived the memory for him.

"No word if other pieces have been located."

Other pieces.

Will's empty stomach dared to expunge as the news reporter finished her broadcast. Brian shook his head and dug out his cigarette pack, near empty, and lit another cigarette.

For the sake of his own self, Will grabbed the remote from Brian's grasp and changed to the channel. The Brujah eyed him but didn't comment. The fledgling, however, was nauseated and didn't want to give his perverted psyche any more ammunition to torture him. He already heard the whispers taunting him.

"Cemetery runoff congealing at the door…", his mind ominously forebode.

"Do you think kindred could've done that?", Will questioned, looking to where Brian had exhaled a thick plume of smoke.

"Kid, there's a lot of shit we're capable of.", the Brujah replied. "Shit you haven't seen me do yet."

That didn't relieve Will. They were supernatural, if not stronger than humans, and if someone had the will to do something so gory — Will couldn't see anyone but a vampire being the culprit.

Could he be capable of murder?

Brian extinguished his cigarette into the arm of the couch and got up. Will sat in front of the television a bit longer, but they were both interrupted by a sudden chime. From their left, a computer whose presence was unbeknownst to them had illuminated with a bright blue screen. Will rose to investigate.

The computer was equipped with a webcam, a keyboard, and what looked to be a microphone. Will placed his fingers on the keyboard and stared down the various icons on the screen. Brian had joined him; looking over the fledgling's shoulder in curious interest. The chime chirped again, and Will tracked it down to an envelope-like icon in the corner of the screen. He clicked on it to find an inbox with only a few emails — several advertisements for "male enhancement" supplements, but only one addressed to him.

"Should I open it?", Will asked Brian, pointing to the email addressed to him.

Brian nodded and Will double-clicked the email. Another box appeared asking for a password, but Will was quite clueless. He looked to Brian who was equally perplexed. Will typed something obvious — "password" into the blank, but not to his surprise it was invalid. He tried several different phrases, yet they were all invalid. Slightly annoyed, Will pushed himself back away from the computer and crossed his arms. Brian shrugged his shoulders.

"It could be anything.", the Brujah pointed out. "See if there's a hint anywhere."

Will came back to the keyboard and noticed a yellow-toned piece of paper sticking from underneath it. He pulled it out and flipped it over; a single phrase on the back reading "*sunrise*". He typed the phrase and alas, the email opened, and the vampires read it together:

> To: <wg@email.com> Sent on Friday at 3:00 A.M.
> From: <unknown.sender@email.com>
> Subject: Your attendance has been requested.
>
> To the fledgling,
> By order of the Prince of Baltimore, you have been summoned to his residence. Failure to comply to the Prince's summons will result in immediate termination. An address has been attached to the bottom of this email.
>
> Signed,
>
> Magistrate of Camarilla Affairs
>
> Leonard Brauner

A sense of dread fell over Will as he reread the email again and again. Brian rolled his eyes and went back towards the kitchen, but Will found himself frozen in the chair. He wasn't prepared to see Hannibal again let alone at his private residence. Every fiber of his being told

him to stay away, but he knew better not to ignore the Prince to his better judgement. The phone rang behind him and Brian was quick to answer it.

The fledgling watched Brian's facial expression go from neutral, to shock, and finally dissolve into irritation. Brian clicked the phone off and went towards the door. Will protested and the Brujah stopped for a moment.

"I have something to take care of tonight.", Brian didn't look at Will as he spoke, but from how tight his brows were furrowed, Will could tell the man was beyond irate. "And no, you aren't coming with me."

"What do you mean I can't go with you?", Will questioned, raising up from the chair. "After last night, we shouldn't separate."

Brian furrowed his brows even tighter and turned for the door. Not willing to take no for an answer, Will approached the Brujah only to be met with coldness. The Brujah made it rather clear that Will was not going to follow him if his stern eyes wasn't a fair warning. Will threatened to bare his own fangs but rethought of that gesture. His ears began to ring with shrillness, and it took all his willpower not to scream on the top of his lungs.

"It's not fair! I want too…", a girl's voice complained, echoing louder than the others who began to ramble after her. "Ooooh! I want too!"

Will dug his fingernails into his palms as he stared down Brian and eventually, the ringing subsided. However, Brian was nearly half-way out the door before Will could argue with him. Before Brian was down the hallway, he looked over his shoulder at the fledgling in the doorway. His expression seemed to soften for a moment. He came back to the doorway where Will crossed his arms. There wasn't much of a height difference, but it seemed like Brian towered over him.

The Brujah's forehead touched Will's and the fledgling laxed.

"No matter what happens, Will.", the Brujah started. "I'll always be by your side."

It was an easy thing to say that he'd come back, but Will already had his fair share of broken promises. Though when Brian looked at him with his eyes of endless grey, he knew the man wasn't deceiving him. He sighed and backed out of the doorway. The Brujah stepped back.

"Now and forever.", the Brujah promised.

"Take care of yourself.", Will said, not knowing whether he wanted to cry or be cross with Brian. Whatever the urgency was, the fledgling still argued that Brian should take him with him.

"You too, kid."

The Brujah was down the hallway and around the corner before he shouted something about the Prince. Will groaned under his breath, remembering the sense of urgency from the email. Reluctantly he went back inside the apartment and towards the computer. He read the email

about a dozen times over before he steeled himself to depart. Brian had left most of their shared money in an ash tray and Will shoved it into his own pocket. A pair of keys were left in a bowl by the door and Will made sure to lock the apartment on his way out. Walking down the stairs and to the street, the city was idle save from a few cars trotting up and down the street.

The address was rather far, and Will walked the many of the city's dark blocks aimlessly. He'd would've liked Brian to guide him through the strangeness of the city, but the Brujah made it clear Will was not to accompany him tonight. It was strange, but Will didn't hear the conversation from the phone. Though offended, he respected Brian's decision. He had many more questions to ask of Brian, but they would meet later in the night.

Unless, the Prince had other plans for him. Will prickled with goosebumps over the many, not-so-pleasant outcomes of the visit. The Prince could already have had a firing squad arranged the moment he arrived or worst — a guillotine for his head. He had started to wonder if Dr. Chilton had spoken with Hannibal and if that was the case — he was royally fucked. Chilton was a miserable wretch of a man and Will wasn't over their confrontation from the previous night. Dr. Chilton seemed to be the kind of snake to dribble lies into the Prince's ear.

Will continued walking with his anxiety mounting. He wouldn't show his fear, no, the Prince already knew he feared him. There was no use denying that Will was practically petrified in his presence. He'd hold his tongue and kiss ass if it meant he'd survive another night.

And see Brian again.

Brian caught a cab back to the familiar cul-de-sac he was beginning to loathe. He tipped the driver, by who all means, was ecstatic by the Brujah's generous tip. Brian cared little about the change, but his attention focused to the house in front of him. A wrecked, luxury vehicle was parked haphazardly across the lawn — a grievous sin in such a neighborhood as pretentious as this one. He walked up the driveway and towards the front door.

The door was slightly ajar and the doorknob was busted. Brian hesitated, but with deft steps he snuck inside the residence. The house was in disarray; furniture overturned, wallpaper peeled like curled nails, and the familiar smell of cooling blood wafted throughout. The Brujah was attentive as he crossed the house, cautious not to make a sound, before proceeding up the stairs.

Upstairs, it was much darker, but Brian could make out the faint outline of a body on the floor. He bared his fangs as he approached the body, but laxed at the aroma of death fumigating from the body-turned-corpse. He bent down to feel the wrist of the deceased; a young woman, far too young to meet such a demise. He crinkled his nose but a sound from down the hall demanded his attention. He followed the noise into an office space littered with papers, overturned furniture, and a familiar yet mangled face.

Dr. Chilton laid over the duvet in a heap of broken bones and battered flesh. Brian approached and instantly, Chilton was wide-eyed and gasping like a strangled fish. The vampire hissed and stepped back, but Chilton fell flat against the bloodied duvet. His suit was

torn asunder to reveal his flesh had been eviscerated. His eyes bulged from his face like two glassy marbles. Brian was sure that Chilton was near death and only watched the sleaze struggle to breathe.

Yet against all odds, Chilton was awake rather than dead. He stared at the Brujah with frantic, fearful eyes. Brian had his reservations about Dr. Chilton especially after last night's debacle, but it would've been cruel to have him die so miserably. He stood over Chilton and his fangs dripped with a thick coating of salvia. The least Brian could do was to relieve the man from such a cruel state. As Brian approached with his fangs, the smell that unraveled itself up his nose repulsed him. He disengaged and stood off from the doctor.

The doctor's face, though slightly unrecognizable in the darkness of the room, had lost its livelihood. Brian could see clumps of hair beginning to fall and grey from the man's shoulders and his suspicions were correct — Chilton was a ghoul. His smell was off, even when they met last night, and it was no surprise to see Chilton withering away. Ghouls weren't immortal or were they invincible. They looked human, but without their regnant or their blood donor — they were nothing but decaying corpses. And at the extent of the doctor's injuries, his miasma of youth was molding into decay. The Brujah scowled at Chilton.

"You are one miserable little shit, you know that?", the Brujah scolded, looking at how Chilton was beginning to melt into a heap of bruised flesh. "All that big talk but you're just a ghoul."

"A *dying* one at that."

Dr. Chilton sputtered, but his lips only trembled rather than formulated speech. Brian, against his judgement, revolted against himself not to let the ghoul die. He raised up his wrist and bit into the delicate flesh; blood dribbled down his pale flesh. He hovered over Dr. Chilton and allowed his blood to drip onto the man's drooping face. Instinctively, Chilton let his tongue roll out his mouth the collect the precious drops. The Brujah retracted his wrist and sucked on the wound and watched Chilton evolve from his beaten, grotesque state into something still lively. His face healed just enough where Brian could recognize his features.

"Thank…", Dr. Chilton began, his lips still not capable of passing words. "…you."

Brian sucked his teeth and looked around the office. It was quite a mess; not to mention the corpse in the hallway. The bay window had been broken out — the curtains dancing in the night's calming breeze. Books had been tossed to every corner of the room. Brian had noticed a safe on the other side of the room ransacked which further confirmed his theory.

A good old-fashioned home invasion. Brian had committed several in his youth, but never to the extent he'd kill the people inside. Sure, a bit of intimidation and threats of death yielded him what he wanted but he wasn't a cold murderer. Chilton was either caught off guard, or ignorant to not give into his attackers' demands of valuables. He wasn't poor or would be in some financial ruin over a couple thousand dollars or a priceless painting. It was mind-boggling to say the least.

“I didn’t think you’d answer.”, Chilton admitted, looking to Brian with bloodied eyes. “I thought the fledgling would’ve came…”

Brian scoffed and went back to Dr. Chilton. Will didn’t need to further entangle himself with any lackeys of the Camarilla let alone Hannibal Lecter. However, this was a cruelty landed upon Dr. Chilton’s doorstep neither Brian or Will expected. The Brujah was sure it was the doctor’s own fault. Trafficking was a dangerous business and Brian wasn’t too fond of traffickers or their practice.

Secretly, Brian was overjoyed to see Chilton beaten like the dog he was, but he knew there was more to this than just two women caught up in an unfortunate, vicious world. Brian would push the issue further before he’d make a move.

“What happened here, *ghoul*?”, Brian asked Chilton, pointing out the empty safe. “Who did this to you?”

Chilton eyed him scornfully but laughed painfully. He held his side and Brian could see a rib protruding from the flesh. He adverted his gaze away as a tinge of thirst crept upon him.

“Your kind did this to me.”, Chilton confessed, his voice strained and raspy. “Your *Anarchs* robbed me.”

Brian furrowed his brows at the accusation. To accuse the entire vampire race of a crime was trivial, but Brian’s sect offended him. He wouldn’t give breath to the accusations or acknowledge their existence, but he did give Chilton the benefit of the doubt he believed him. No one in Brian’s inner circle had just cause to come for Chilton or his wealth — they had no need for either his money or his blood. Possible candidates came to mind, but they weren’t so bold to attack a Prince’s ghoul so brazenly.

Brian applauded them though.

“When did they attack you?”

Chilton wheezed. His breathing was becoming more strained and the Brujah had to lean in close to hear him.

“Tonight…after I came home from…a dinner party.”

“What did they take?”, the Brujah questioned, looking at the disarrayed office. “Looks like they made off with whatever they could carry.”

Chilton glared at the Brujah. There was no needed explanation. Brian assumed his attackers took the women in some form of vigilante justice, but to ransack and murder his housemaid was something entirely chaotic.

“Right. Do you at least remember who attacked you?”, Brian pressed. “How many came in?”

Chilton held up his crumped fingers; three. That number narrowed the possible candidates, but still vague and unconvincing. Brian flipped a chair upright and brought it closer to Chilton. He sat down as the doctor mumbled under his breath. Frankly, Brian could care less

about Chilton but if the man was anything — he had no backbone. He would go crawling back to his Camarilla overlords and the last thing Brian needed was more scrutiny on his movements.

Chilton heaved over the side of the duvet before falling back miserably. His breathing became more strangled and the Brujah took note of his quieting heartbeat.

“Tell me anything you remember, or I’ll let you *fucking* die.”, Brian hissed, pulling the doctor over to him. “If you want my help, you better start talking.”

The doctor audibly choked, and tears welled in his eyes and Brian let him go. Chilton took a few moments to catch his ever-so fleeting breath before he untwisted his lips to speak.

“Gideon…”, the man replied. “Him and his thin-blooded posse.”

Thin-blooded. Brian wasn’t sure whether he should be alarmed or skeptical. All vampires were full-blooded denizens of the night, but the notion of a thin-blooded vampire seemed mythical. Brian had heard the rumors, but he refused they existed or the Anarchs had anything to do with them.

However, Gideon was a wildcard. He was a Gangrel, the lowest of them in fact, and Brian had his fair share of run-ins with the fellow Anarch. He wasn’t insane, but borderline demonic in his ways. Animalistic, even, as Gideon was more animal than he was vampire. The Brujah wondered why Matthew would allow Gideon within the movement let alone in their domain, but Matthew was sure they needed Gideon against the Camarilla.

Brian would’ve rather have Gideon staked than fight alongside him.

The Brujah rose up to walk away from Chilton till the man caught his wrist. The vampire glared at him with sharp eyes as Dr. Chilton held him like an anchor.

“Please…”, the doctor pitifully begged. “I just need a bit more…”

The Brujah jerked his arm away and frowned. He turned his back to the doctor, who, nearly broke into tears as the vampire grew more distant from him. Brian could care less if the doctor expired right then and there but he needed to investigate the claim of thin-blooded vampires and a familiar name.

“Don’t die on me, you hear?”, Brian said to the doctor as he stepped out the office. He looked over his shoulder to find Chilton both on the floor and duvet. In his fail attempt to crawl after him, Dr. Chilton looked more helpless than he already was.

“I’ll be back.”

With that, Brian disappeared into the darkened hallway. He stepped over the dead house maid on the floor and down the stairs. He’d return to Chilton, or not, really, it didn’t matter whether the doctor lived or died. He wasn’t fan of the Camarilla or their lackeys — or a ghoul. He needed to get back to the city before the night was over with.

He began the long walk back to civilization when his mind began to drift back to Will. He wondered where the fledgling was, if the fledgling took heed to the Prince's invitation, though the latter was beginning to sound possible. Eventually, he'd catch up to Will but he couldn't help but fret over his whereabouts. Brian lit a cigarette as he walked.

If he could say anything about Will Graham — the kid was tough, unbelievably tough, and he'd be damned if he would spend all night worrying about him. He's been through more than enough trauma to last a millennium, but the Brujah had faith in the kid.

After all, he was an Anarch-in-the-making.

Will felt out of place as he stood in front of large, double-gated skyscraper with frightening gargoyles that surveyed his every move. He reread the number placard bolted into the building several times over before he mustered the courage to let himself in. He watched above him as those said gargoyles ogled his entrance; their concrete eyes unnerving.

Inside, he was met with cool light above him. The lobby was practically empty of denizens as Will walked in. The floor underneath him was of pure ivory marble and it glistened like crafted starlight. Flights of escalators bordered the lobby as well as an extravagant, winding staircase. He looked around only to find he was alone, but further in the distant he could spot a figure leaning over on a desk. He walked briskly, not too fast, rather a pace he was most comfortable with. His hands shook nervously in his pockets, but he kept his face composed and natural.

At the front desk sat an unsuspecting, husky man with dark curls and feverish hands. He was typing aimlessly on a screen much too small to focus on but was startled at Will's sudden presence. He straightened up and stared at the fledgling with wide eyes.

"May I help you?", the security guard asked, his voice miniature and naïve. "Are you here to see a resident?"

Will read the name printed on the security guard's breast and he tried to make note of it. The security guard was named "Franklyn", but Will couldn't piece it together with his mind fragmenting each letter. He wet his lips and smiled politely.

"I'm here to see the Prince.", Will replied, keeping his smile tight and upright. "I am expected."

The security guard looked at him blankly, but his eyes drifted down to his computer screen. He typed on a couple keys but kept his eyes warily to Will as the fledgling waited on pins and needles.

"I'm sorry, but who are you here to see?", Franklyn asked again quietly. "W-we don't have anyone of that name here…"

Will felt his eyes roll back into his skull as he leaned over the counter. He smelled Franklyn's cheap cologne and musk. He only saw Franklyn as a festering heap of flesh and pus — much to his mind's imagination. His head cocked to the side and his stare became darkened.

Franklyn grew uneasy and scooted backwards in his chair as Will approached uncomfortably close.

“I’m not going to repeat myself…”, Will stared, his stare narrowing. “I’m here to see the Prince…”

Franklyn gulped and beads of sweat dotted his blotchy face. He quickly began to click on the keys as Will’s stare became hauntingly frightening. Nearby, a printer had begun to sputter and crunch out a piece of paper. Franklyn twirled around in his chair to retrieve the paper and quickly slid it to Will. Soon, a pen accompanied the piece of paper.

“Please…”, the poor guard’s lips trembled. “Just sign in first…”

Will blinked slowly but picked up the pen and made a quick stroke across the paper. He handed it back to Franklyn, who, relieved that the fledgling wasn’t eyeing him so viciously — pointed to the elevator at the farthest end of the lobby.

“It’s going to be the penthouse floor…”, Franklyn said, cowering behind the desk. “It’ll be the only button.”

The fledgling gave a curt nod and walked away from the desk. Franklyn didn’t take his eyes off Will till the vampire disappeared into the elevator. Truly, Will didn’t mean to frighten him. In fact, he didn’t realize how terrifying it must’ve been for Franklyn to be approached in such a manner.

Inside the elevator, Will exhaled shakily and abided his time. He had to steel himself before he met with the Prince. It took every fiber of himself not to break out in hysterical crying as the elevator pinged. He stepped out of the elevator into another lobby, but it much more like a foyer instead. There was only one door at the end of the short walkway; immaculate, and painted bright red. Will approached and knocked softly against the heavy wood.

To his own surprise, the door opened on its own accord. The fledgling took cautious steps only to be greeted by two flights of curved stairs. Rather unsure on what path to take, Will climbed the flight of stairs closest to him. Again, he was greeted by a set of double-doors and he knocked once more. Yet this time, he heard the locks click on the other side before being let inside.

In front of him was nothing but glass panes on every inch of wall. The view was beautiful, if not like anything Will had ever seen. He had a whole view of Baltimore and the Chesapeake in front of him. The moon was high in the night’s sky and Will caught himself mesmerized in its lunar gaze. Before he could step inside, however, he was stalked by a not-so unfamiliar being.

The Prince’s bodyguard stood in front of him with a gargled scowl. Though his sword was vacant of his possession, just the sheer size of him alone left Will wallowing in the same despair he felt two nights prior at the trial. He instinctively wanted to run back down the stairs and to the elevator, but he was sure the guard would’ve caught him first. The guard, thankfully, only ushered for the fledgling to join him inside.The young vampire did as he was instructed, introducing himself into the penthouse with watchful eyes. The penthouse was

finely decorated with furniture that'd Will was too wary to even approach. The living room alone was bigger than anything Will had experienced. At the same time, the guard was gesturing for Will to follow him downstairs to the penthouse's living space. Will wasn't used to such expansive spaces especially with so much finery. He followed closely till both he and the guard stood in front of yet another ornate door. The guard grasped the knob and opened the door.

Will swallowed. He was inside an office space that was decorated with clear glass panes. Above him was another tier covered in bookcases filled with books that nearly touched the ceiling. A chandelier embedded with dazzling crystals glistened down on him like starlight. Everything in the room had a sense of wealth that Will could never hope to comprehend. It was all cohesive in design though Will wasn't sure how it was possible to accumulate such wealth in one room. However, when the fledgling looked across the room — his heart sunk heavy in his chest.

Hannibal leaned against a desk of dark mahogany with a wine glass cusped by its neck between his fine, elongated fingers. His attention was directed to the view outside of his office, but it quickly adverted to the entrance of Will and his hired guard. He hid a curt smile behind the rim of his glass as he finished the deep, sanguine-colored lacquer within it. He sat the wine glass down and ushered for his guard to give them the room.

Will swallowed thickly as the guard bowed and exited the office deftly. Then, Hannibal ushered for Will to come closer. The fledgling wanted nothing more but to die in that moment. His legs compelled him forward as he was forced to stare into Hannibal's hauntingly deep eyes. He was offered a seat across from the desk as Hannibal sat on the other side. Will politely took the seat but was on the edge of it as it would've been foolish to get comfortable in the Prince's presence.

"Good evening, William.", the Prince greeted warmly. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

The fledgling felt himself getting queasy, but he graciously forced himself to smile. His hands cusped so tightly in his lap he was afraid that he wouldn't be unable to untangle them should Hannibal ask for a handshake. To his relief, the Prince did not motion for a handshake, but he did take notice of the fledgling's uneasiness. Fervently, Will cowered down. To put it frankly, he was scared to death. Hannibal only studied the fledgling' state with lidded eyes but made no motion to question it.

"Do you have any thought of why I have summoned you tonight?", the Prince questioned, seeing how the fledgling flinched at the sound of his voice

To kill me, of course. Will halted his liberal tongue.

Will raised his eyes but made no notion to respond. He shook his head and parted his lips to speak but closed them once Hannibal noticed. Hannibal leaned in closer only to have Will distance himself further in his seat. Silence lingered between them. Out of curiosity than malice, Hannibal slid his hand across the desk but that gesture instantly made Will recoil from his reach.

“You’re cautious. I understand your restraint especially after the trauma you’ve experienced, William.”, the Prince attempted to be empathetic, but truly, he drew glee from prying into Will’s fear reserves.

“But I didn’t call you hear to torment you.”

Will furrowed his brows and allowed his stare to drift dangerously close towards Hannibal’s own. He heard the beginnings of whispers echoing in the very back crevices of his head.

“A trick with two tongues.”, an older man’s raspy voice warned. “Beware of the two tongues…”

The fledgling bit his inner cheek to silence the ramblings of his mind as Hannibal eyed him with warming eyes. Still cautious, Will refused to allow himself to be placated by tender words and meritless promises. However, he calmed himself when he imagined his hands around Hannibal’s throat, tightening, and eventually strangling the life out of him. As sickening as the fantasy was, it was a much-needed distraction.

“Dr. Chilton spoke highly of you, William.”, the Prince cited. “In fact, he was willing to commission your help once again.”

Will didn’t dare to scoff or show his disinterest towards the praise, but he truly couldn’t stand Dr. Chilton’s guts. His other assumption was correct as well; Dr. Chilton was nothing but a kiss-ass. Yet, he curtly smiled and attempted to relax himself in the chair.

“I shall send him a hare’s head for his honesty.”, Will could kick himself on how pretentious he was being.

Hannibal raised his eyebrows at the peculiar response but didn’t speak on it. He had met a fair pool of kindred over the years; grotesque Nosferatu, paranoid Tremere, and his own pretentious Ventrue, but never had he had an experience with a Malkavian. He had heard their language was fluid with ramblings of their mad forefather, but in time since Will has been in his presence — he seemed more lucid than his fellow brethern.

It wasn’t a matter of how Will’s lucidity would evolve into madness, but *when*. Hannibal made a mental note.

“I have an assignment for you, William. Rather, it’s a cumulative assignment for you.”, Hannibal said, revealing a folder from his desk’s drawer.

He slid it across the desk and the fledgling leaned forward to catch it. He opened it and quickly averted his eyes away from the contents. Hannibal made another mental note of Will’s reaction. The fledgling brought his eyes over again to scan the contents within the folder; a series of photos, news-clippings, and documents. The Prince watched Will’s eyes bounce from page to page in what looked to be an attempt to process what he was seeing.

“A serial killer in our midst, yes. As mundane as it sounds, I’ve been briefed to believe the culprit is kindred.”

Will remembered the visceral crime scenes on the nightly news and frowned.

“As all kindred are bond to the Masquerade, our culprit is infringing upon our right of existence.”

“This will require you spend time in the inner city, William.”, Hannibal pointed out. “Should your prowess of investigation prove fruitful, I’ll take the necessary precautions of deposing of our fiend.”

“Should you lose this folder – I’ve had the information sent to your email.”

“If I refuse?”, Will retorted, looking to Hannibal with cynical eyes. “Can I expect a stake to the back?”

Hannibal pinched his brows together as he leaned closer. Will leaned back but was unable to escape the Prince’s glare. Those maroon eyes had narrowed into a deep, bold shade of darkness that made Will feel cloudy and confused.

“You will not disobey me, fledgling.”, Hannibal warned, his tone dangerously low. “Do you understand?”

Will nodded his head and felt himself laugh. His mind buzzed, but it was a pleasantly numb feeling that washed over him. He didn’t register himself answering back to Hannibal, but soon he was standing. The folder was tucked underneath his arm. Hannibal leaned back in his chair and averted his gaze back to his view of Baltimore.

“We shall resume this talk at a later time. Retire here for the evening. It’d be rude if I allowed you to venture home by yourself.”, Hannibal said, gesturing Will towards the door.

With that, Will was compelled to leave Hannibal’s office only to be led by his bodyguard to a nearby hallway. He was allowed into a bedroom quite too large just to sleep a single person, but still meticulously decorated with purple and gol

Will sat the folder on a nearby dresser and undressed himself. The bodyguard made sure he was completely into bed before stalking back down the hallway. As if some miasma had dissipated over him, Will was now aware of his new surroundings. Rather than question what happened to him over the span of mere minutes, he molded into the mattress.

To his luck — he wasn’t dead, or at least, spared for the night. Hypnotized, maybe, but he wasn’t dead just yet. He would’ve thought Hannibal would’ve had his bodyguard string him up by his legs and beat on him like a punching bag. Yet, he was unharmed though a bit shaken. He’d go back home the moment he could sneak away, but that thought faded when he yawned.

Whether it was Hannibal’s influence or him being tired from last night, Will lulled himself to sleep after moments of absolute darkness. For now, he’d follow along, but he wasn’t looking forward to the many nights he had left.

Chapter End Notes

Franklyn is just trying to do his job, Will, give him a break. And yes, Chilton deserves everything he has coming to him.

See you next update.

Thin-Blooded

Chapter Summary

Hannibal studies Will further as Brian has to come to terms with an old friend.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for descriptions of violence. Please continue with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VI

"Thin-Blooded"

Hannibal entered the guest room with soft, poised footsteps. The room was dark, void of windows, but cool and temperate to sleep in. The darkened, violet walls trimmed with gold made the room feel expansive at the same time constrictive. He wasn't fan of how much the violet reigned over the gold, but it was a room he hadn't had the pleasure of redecorating. In the middle of the room laid a large, curved bed crafted from dark wood and accessorized with a fitting bedspread. Underneath the mountain of blankets, the fledgling rested with his pouty lips wet by a string of salvia attached to the pillow under him. His body had curved towards the pillow behind him. Flecks of sleep dotted his eyelashes.

The Prince sat at the edge of the bed and watched the fledgling in the darkness. Even from where he sat, Hannibal could tell the fledgling was of a lithe build — hardly any weight clinging to his already shrinking frame. He looked to be extremely glass-skinned, almost too fragile to touch, and it interested Hannibal. His hand reached to feel Will's ankle; the thin, willowy skin cool under his finger pads.

A travesty. Hannibal stopped his ministrations as the fledgling began to shift in his sleep. Hannibal was fond of the downtrodden and hopeless; it made for good drama. Yet, he couldn't help being drawn to Will's presence. Whether it was out of sheer boredom, or something perverse, Hannibal couldn't name his fascination with the lone fledgling. He thought of it because of Will's Malkavanism, but he had met many Malkavians his day more interesting than Will Graham. He was beautiful, stunning really, but Hannibal had a lifetime of being surrounded by beautiful things.

He'd ponder on it.

From the hallway, Hannibal heard the clicking of heels against the marbled floor. He left Will to slumber peacefully and closed the door softly behind him. Bedelia, slender and elegant, leaned her cat-like physique against a column separating the hallway from the living room. They greeted one another with short, friendly kisses to each other's cheeks but it was Bedelia who broke away. She gazed past Hannibal's shoulder towards the guest room and gave him a disapproving look.

"You're obsessed, again.", she accused, sharpening her glare into Hannibal. He sucked in his teeth at the accusation and brushed past her. He practically waltzed across the living room as Bedelia followed him — her pace quickening up to his own. She stopped him again by grabbing hold of his arm. In response, Hannibal spun himself and Bedelia around till they both was interlocked. She was red in the face, but her expression remained unaltered.

"The only obsession I have is you.", Hannibal lied. "How could I not be?"

Flattered, Bedelia softened and cusped Hannibal's cheek but she was no fool. She was perhaps the only one in the entire city that could see past his flattery. Safe to say, Bedelia knew a liar when she heard one. In her own devilish way, she knew how to tune Hannibal like the fiddle he played. Hannibal wouldn't admit he lied, but eventually she would coax it out of him whether in the heat of passion or during their routinely conversations.

Hannibal made note to not pursue the topic any further in the future with her.

"Please, you know I'm immune to your charms.", Bedelia jested, leading him to join her on the elongated sofa.

The Prince smiled coyly and took her lead. She made herself familiar in his lap and brushed his stray hairs from his face. He sighed and watched her — her attentive hands focused on coaxing the hairs back into place. She was beautiful, in the haze of the night, and Hannibal found himself appreciating every wrinkle and crease of her face.

"You're infatuated with something dangerous, Hannibal.", she warned and stopped her grooming.

He stifled a chuckle but allowed her to nitpick over his interests. She fretted over Hannibal even if she appeared to be aloof to his dealings.

She had accused him of obsession yet, it was quite the opposite. She knew everything Hannibal allowed her to know about him though, she had become inquisitive in his private affairs recently.

"I promise you, I'm focused only on furthering the future of the Camarilla.", he told her, shifting her off his lap.

Bedelia furrowed her brows as her lips thinned. She was not gullible or ignorant, but she fully suspected Hannibal's attention was elsewhere. Occasionally, her eyes would wander behind them, but never once did she pursue her suspicions. As often as she visited Hannibal's abode, slept in his bed, made him dinners he couldn't partake in — never once did she overstep her boundaries.

“Of course, my Prince. The Camarilla is everything”, Bedelia distanced herself from Hannibal by retiring to his bar, pouring her own drink. “Speaking of which, have you gotten word on your diplomat?”

Funny. Hannibal hadn’t thought of Bedelia as a politician. Secondly, the thought had fled him. He was expecting such a visitor; another Prince of the Camarilla. Over the last two nights, Hannibal was shamefully incoherent on thoughts of business matters rather, he preoccupied his attention to the fledgling. There was no immediacy when it came to Camarilla matters.

Hannibal could care less of the Camarilla; in fact, he didn’t. It was a disorganized, self-righteous sect Hannibal loathed. It was all a façade, of course, as the Camarilla was a weaker shell of its former self. He blamed the Camarilla’s quickness in appointing newer generations of Princes and primogens — their lack of experience practically destroyed the cities they were responsible for. The Camarilla ruled with blood and old-world tactics in an ever-so modern world. Kine were no longer ignorant of kindred presence and they advanced whilst vampires grew secluded and senile.

They no longer fought with scriptures and stakes, but with bullets and napalm. He felt embarrassed for the Camarilla, really, as it lacked true leadership. In Hannibal’s eyes, the Camarilla needed a renewal if it wanted to maintain the ever-so waning authority it had. Atlanta was their most recent failure. Hannibal wasn’t going to let Baltimore follow the same path.

On the other hand, he prided himself in being well-versed with leadership and politics. He made friends in low places while enemies in high places. He charmed and dominated kine and kindred alike. After all, the Masquerade was a game that must be played well — or risk the final death. Taking the reins of the Camarilla wouldn’t pose a challenge, but eventually the kingdom would bore him. Hannibal glanced back towards the hallway.

Will Graham wouldn’t.

“He’ll arrive within the week, beloved.”, Hannibal went to observe Baltimore outside his windows. Bedelia came to him with her drink caressed between her hands.

He averted his eyes to her face. The creases around her eyes crinkled whenever she squinted, her lips tightened then relaxed, and her gaze was always vigilant. In these brief moments of calmness, Hannibal studied his companion and took intimate details on her changing features. Ms. Du Maurier looked at Hannibal will a gaze open to conversation. Yet, Hannibal didn’t entertain her.

“Don’t ever doubt my intentions, Ms. Du Maurier.”, Hannibal’s eyes narrowed towards the city. “Or you won’t be advising me for another night.”

He heard Bedelia’s breath hitch in her throat, but she only dutifully nodded and stepped back from Hannibal. She had excused herself to retire to Hannibal’s study, but the Prince could feel the hinges of fear echoing her steps as she walked away. He feinted a smile and continued to overlook the city.

Cruel. Hannibal couldn't help but scold himself. *Incredibly cruel*.

Brian was no stranger to run-down neighborhoods or being watched, but he wasn't a fan of walking blindly to a possible death trap. The sidewalk underneath him was cracked and riddled with decay as the houses along the way had become havens for the criminal and destitute. He kept his wits about him as the flicker of gold, red, and sometimes silver eyes followed him in the shadows.

Towards the end of the street was a brick stone townhouse with several people of all types; kine and kindred alike. Their blaring music screeched into the night's air. He walked up the cobblestone steps only to be greeted with scornful eyes and twitching lips. However, he was not intimidated let alone frightened. He made it to the front door, but an arm blocked his entrance. The man in the doorway was nearly thrice Brian's physique and just as foul-looking. They eyed one another till the man stepped aside, his eyes lowering as Brian passed.

Inside the foyer, Brian smelled the overwhelming aromas of cigarette smoke and filth. Earshot of him, he heard mumbled conversations and pained sounds of sex in the air. He tightened his scowl as he passed by units of apartments with sounds of violence, passion, and secrecy echoing past. He went up the staircase and the steps underneath him creaked nosily. Upstairs, the hallway had tatted men brandishing guns and knives on their hips on both sides. Almost immediately, their attention focused onto Brian.

The Brujah didn't brandish his own weapon given that he was unarmed, but he passed by the pack ready to pounce onto him at short notice. The pack only mumbled to one another as the Brujah made his way to the last apartment at the end; the door indicated with bright red spray paint. Before he could enter said apartment, he was once again stopped by a kine with too much brawn and not enough intelligence. Brian inhaled and exerted his presence — his influence targeting the man blocking his way. As if he was possessed, the man stepped aside and allowed Brian to proceed.

The Brujah stepped inside the apartment to find overturned furniture, peeling wallpaper, and the musk of death in the air. His nostrils flared, but it was his gag reflex that was the first to give in. He put a hand over his mouth as he proceeded through the apartment. The kitchen, or lack thereof, had been converted to a makeshift chemist's lab given the many containers of unmarked substances. Kitchen utensils had been turned into measuring instruments. He grimaced and turned his head towards laughter of men in the other room.

He approached the doorway where he saw four men sitting at a table; cards, money, and beer cans around them. He listened in onto their conversations over the money in front of them. Humans were greedy creatures. They fought over mere pennies and killed over dollars. Brian pitied humans much more than was allowed. Had humans witnessed the horrors of being a vampire; pennies would be meaningless to them. Brian's eye caught another figure much feral-like, bulkier than the men sitting around the folding table. The Brujah could make out the ink etched into scarred skin; an Anarch.

Rather than sneaking in, Brian let himself into the room. As if they shared a hive-mind, the men sitting around the table bolted with their guns and knives drawn to Brian's entrance. He could smell them now; not kine but not kindred either. They were the thin-blooded halflings

Chilton warned about — something Brian had refused to believe but looking at the men bare their hardly-sprouted fangs proved otherwise.

He saw the perverted hunger in their eyes, and he bore his own fangs — making the group of thin-bloods shudder. The Anarch in question revealed himself in the light of an open window; his dirty-blonde hair like curled tendrils down his shoulders. Brian grimaced and the thin-bloods were called back by the other Anarch.

“Abel.”, the name was tart on Brian’s tongue.

“Zeller.”, the Anarch, Abel, responded, his lidded eyes drifting dangerously sharp towards Brian.

“I didn’t realize we were on last-name basis.”

“Me neither, big brother., Gideon laughed, noticing how Brian was unamused by the jest. “Oh how you hurt my heart so.”

“Save it, Gideon.”, Brian scolded. “I’m not here for a friendly chat.”

Gideon crossed his arms.

“Chilton. Why’d you do it?”

Gideon threw his head back into a boisterous laugh and his pack of thin-bloods, some of them still bristled, only grew more guarded and cautious of Brian. Brian felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand at attention as Gideon nearly turned pale pink from laughter. He stopped and revealed a mouthful of razor sharp, curved fangs on both his upper and lower gums. Gideon, or what Brian knew him as Abel, had thrice the physique and quadruple the brawn compared to the Brujah. He was relentless, unpredictable, and the worst kind of Gangrel Brian had the displeasure of knowing.

The Brujah kept his guard up, however, as he was unarmed saved for his own wits. He could dispatch the pack of thin-bloods easily, but Gideon would kill him before Brian could react.

“Why not, Brian? He’s another Camarilla mutt needing a good beating.”, Gideon’s response was harsh, almost too cold to hear.

Brian bit down on his inner cheek as disgust bubbled up his throat. Abel, in the least amount of words, was cruel even for vampire standards. Gideon appeared to be unfazed by the accusation of violence as he barked for his posse of thin-bloods to clear the room. Without second thought, the thin-bloods fled the room as Gideon pulled a chair from the table. He sat down with his bulky arms crossed across his knees. The Brujah remained standing.

“You and Matthew are so keen to keep your fuckin’ hands clean.”, Gideon started. “Forget all about the true movement.”

“Killing for sport isn’t what we’re about.”, the Brujah counterargued. “You had no right-...”

Gideon rose out of his chair which caused it to rattle and tip over.

“You’re no Brujah, Brian Zeller.”, Abel accused. “Or an Anarch.”

“That’s rich, coming from you.”, Brian retorted. “I was fighting Camarilla fascism long before you were Embraced, Abel.”

The Gangrel let out a throaty laugh and threw his arm violently out; causing the folding table to crash into the floor.

“It doesn’t matter to me.”, Abel began, his eyes focused towards the Brujah. “You don’t matter to me.”

Brian steeled himself as Gideon approached him. His physique towered over Brian, but the older, cautious Brujah stood his ground and allowed his Anarch compatriot to size him. Had he been another vampire, he would’ve gutted Gideon where he stood but, he’d like to believe Gideon was led astray for the briefest of moments. Yet when Gideon’s hands clasped around his throat and he was tossed across the room, nearly out the window, Brian was assured that Gideon was no longer an Anarch let alone his friend.

The Brujah was slammed, choked, and dragged around the room like a ragdoll. He was thrown against the wall hard enough that he heard his own ribs cracking. Blood began to dribble from his mouth as the Brujah stumbled up to his feet.

“All of you are weak.”, Gideon huffed, his tongue darting across his lips. “You, Matthew, and all the other shit Anarchs in this city.”

The Brujah held his tongue as the pain became an annoyance.

“No more Anarchs.”, the Gangrel’s voice had begun to take a husky, ravaged tone. “No more Princes.”

“No more *you*.”

Gideon was big, but just as quick as in mere steps he was upon Brian once more. The Brujah interlocked his arms with the Gangrel as they both were in a struggle of might. Alone, the Brujah couldn’t hope to overpower the Gangrel’s massiveness, but with potence coursing through — he was able to break free of Gideon’s vicegrip and push him far across the room.

Blood oozed from Brian’s nose as Gideon hunkered down onto all fours. His jaw had practically unhinged and his eyes were a bright yellow hue. The Brujah held his side with a pained expression. However, he had the open window to his back; the night’s wind lassoing around him. He couldn’t beat Gideon in a fair fight, but he could maim him as he noticed a gargled fence line underneath them. The posts were wickedly sharp and if the Brujah was quick enough, could easily have Gideon over the balcony and onto said fence posts. The pain of his mortal flesh hindered him, but he couldn’t let his guard down.

“Abel…”, Brian began, watching how the now ex-Anarch seemed to brace himself for the kill. “This isn’t you…”

Brian wasn't going to count on chivalry to save the day or was he appeasing to what humanity was left in Gideon. He couldn't kill Gideon.

Whatever had possessed Gideon to morph into the feral, unfeeling monster he was now wasn't what Brian ever thought he would seen from the Anarch. He was his friend, at least a comrade of the cause, and Brian couldn't murder another Anarch.

It'd make him no better than the Camarilla.

"Don't make me do this…", Brian was begging at this point as his heart had grown heavy in his chest.

Gideon charged at him on all fours and Brian stood firm. As Gideon was about to crash into Brian, the Brujah bolted downwards and used the Gangrel's weight against him; overturning the vampire over his shoulders. A sharp bark echoed past him, but it was only a strained gasp that lingered. Brian looked over the balcony to see Gideon — wide-eyed, gasping, with a giant hole where his heart would've been. He was pierced through the back onto the fence post as his dark blood oozed from his grievous wound.

The Brujah held his breathe as Gideon was staring at him with pained, feral eyes. Even impaled, the Gangrel still wanted to rip Brian apart. The Brujah felt a prang of moroseness in his gut, but it soon turned to apathy as Gideon was helplessly trying to free himself from his impalement.

It was a fruitless attempt as blood had begun to bathe the pavement. Onlookers watched in horror as Gideon could no longer shimmy his body from the metal rod. His eyes rolled back, and a wicked smile darted across his face. Brian lowered his eyes as a bright warm miasma of orange ignited from Gideon. People had begun to scatter in all directions, but it was only hot ashes left in Gideon's place.

Brian looked over his shoulder to find his former friend's thin-blooded mongrels baring teeth and blades. The Brujah could've laughed if his ribs weren't jutting out from his side. His blood felt like static coursing through his veins and he was tempted to do away with the pack. The night was getting older and soon the sun would creep upon the horizon. For now, Brian absconded from the thin-bloods as he reappeared across the street. He heard their confused, frantic yelling as he slipped into the dark of the night. When he was close enough to hail a lonely cab, he felt a something cool run down his cheek. He dabbed a bloodied tear from his cheek and chuckled.

What a shame. Brian limped into the cab and handed the driver a bloodied clump of dollar bills. *Vampires don't cry*.

The cab driver didn't question how such bills became bloodied, but he dutifully drove Brian where he'd asked. He sat in the back of the cab with his head lolled back onto the seat.

I'm getting too old for this shit. Brian thought to himself as it was a long ride back home…

Electronic music bumped and thumped around the crowded space of The Last Call. Above the dance-crazed patrons were metal cages of exotic dancers moving their bodies in seductive numbers. The scent of alcohol and sex lingered heavily in the air. However, Matthew couldn't partake in either the drinking given he was black and blue from his neck down to his toes. He watched morosely from the upper balcony with an unsmoked cigarette between his bruised knuckles.

Matthew was a fighter more than a lover though only if he won the fight. He was used to schoolyard brawls or all-for-one duels, but he didn't expect to get ambushed let alone a bottle cracked over his head. He must've won since he wasn't missing an appendage or dead. From what Freddie told him, it was a close fight. Had Matthew been a weaker vampire, he would've faced the final death.

She mentioned his opponent was some "big fucking freak" in the alleyway bleeding out from a severed leg. Matthew beamed at that news but dimmed when noticed the amount of blood dripping off him. So here he was; overlooking his nightclub bruised and on the verge of collapsing from the blood loss. He would've liked to be drunkenly dumb like his kine patrons down on the dance floor or passed out on the couches.

He was plagued by his depressive thoughts and his idled hands. He was more bearable when he was in a drunken stupor, but Freddie had forbade him drinking tonight. She meant well, really, but Matthew couldn't stand himself when he was sober. He had The Last Call to take care of, at least, not burn it down within the night. As he looked around the dancefloor, he caught the glimpse of red curls wafting around gyrating bodies. Freddie had stopped at the foot of the stairs with her own drink in her grasp.

Matthew scoffed as she joined him on the upper balcony.

"What happened to the 'no drinking' rule?", he asked, eyeing the liquor left in her styrofoam cup.

She rolled her eyes and downed the drink in a single swallow. She discarded the styrofoam cup behind her.

"That only applies to you, Matt.", she replied, a curt smile crossed her fox-like face.

Matthew could describe his dearest friend as the thorn in his side with a killer smile. Freddie was a riot-starter of a Toreador and if Matthew knew different, he would've thought she was Brujah. They knew each other long before the Camarilla festered in Baltimore and ever since then, they were inseparable. They enjoyed each other's company, for the most part, and hadn't killed each other yet. In a way, they were two sides of the same coin. Freddie kept him grounded.

He kept her *safe*.

"Heard anything lately?", Matthew casted his eyes over to drunken kine shoving one another down below.

Freddie leaned against the railing and her red hair tumbled down her shoulders.

“If it’s about the sarcophagus, then no, I haven’t heard anything else. It’s still on that ship.”

Matthew wasn’t a scholar of history let alone vampire history, but the sarcophagus made the hairs of his neck curl. There wasn’t a single vampire in the city not talking about the sarcophagus as many rumors floated around about what was inside. However, Matthew could care less on what or who was inside but rather, he was interested in the Prince’s interest of it.

“The fledgling?”, Matthew asked. “Any word on his whereabouts?”

Freddie shrugged her shoulders.

“Still the Camarilla’s pet poodle.”, she replied, scorn dripping from her tone.

“He doesn’t have a choice, Freddie.”, Matthew gritted his teeth at his friend’s remark.

As if she was like thin air, Freddie was in front of Matthew with her eyes dangerously keen on ripping the Anarch leader apart. However, Matthew did not falter or give in, instead, he sized Freddie up. She was a foot shorter than him given she was in flat shoes, but she matched in intensity.

“Do you think he has the choice right about now?”, Matthew felt his jaw tighten up.

“We all have a choice, Matthew.”, with that, Freddie turned away from him. He stepped back, but he could smell the lemony shampoo she used in her hair. He looked away and was ashamed of his bout of anger.

“You’re starting to care too much.”

Matthew disregarded her criticism. Had vampires cared more for one another, the Camarilla wouldn’t exist or trample over their lives with their heavy boots. She walked down the steps and into her room. Over the loud music, Matthew could hear her door slam and her own music blaring around in her room. He couldn’t argue politics with Freddie. She’d already had her fair share of trauma at the whim of the Camarilla. He couldn’t expect her to be on his side in these matters, but he had hoped she would see what he saw in Will Graham.

An opportunity.

It was too early to tell what path Will Graham would walk along, but Matthew saw something he hadn’t seen in any vampire’s eyes in quite some time. He saw anger, a hot steaming kind of anger, and it was all for Hannibal Lecter to feel. Should the fledgling hold that anger, Matthew would call him another Anarch in the making.

As if the music stopped mid-song, the patrons of the dance floor paused their drunken grinding. They parted towards both sides of the dance floor as a bloodied, bruised figure of man staggered between them. Matthew came to the railing and he recognized the injured man; Brian Zeller. He whistled for Freddie and instantly, she came out of her room on the far side of the bar. She too recognized Brian and went towards him. Matthew whistled for the DJ to resume the music and faithfully, the DJ resumed the throbbing music. The Anarch rushed

down the stairs to catch Brian before he fell to the floor. He had to drag him away from the grinding bodies and towards the back.

“Brian! What happened to you? Brian!”, Matthew yelled at the fellow Brujah, watching how Brian’s eyes couldn’t seem to focus on anywhere but the ceiling.

Brian muttered something in the old language, but Matthew couldn’t make sense of his words. Freddie soon joined him and cusped the Brujah’s face.

“Both of you have a habit of getting yourselves fucked up, huh?”, she said as she tried to keep Brian’s held from rolling backwards.

“He needs blood. Find me some.”

Matthew nodded and raced back to the bar. From the counter, the bar tender didn’t need any further notion on what Matthew required. She ducked under the counter to slip a thin, pack of plastic filled with deep-red liquid. The Anarch slid her a bill from his pocket and she accepted it, sliding into in her own pocket. Matthew joined Brian and Freddie.

She took the blood pack from him and sliced it open, letting the blood ooze over Brian’s lips. The Brujah greedily accepted the vitae and sucked the rest of it on his own. The pair of Anarchs only watched as the Brujah sucked the bag dry and threw it aside. He uttered in the old language and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Brian, what happened to you?”, Freddie asked. “I’ve never seen you like this.”

“Gideon happened.”, the Brujah gritted back, digging in his jacket pocket to retrieve his cigarettes.

Matthew and Freddie shared skeptical looks with one another as neither of them didn’t think it was in their best interest to question the Brujah. Brian lit his cigarette with a pained expression and inhaled it deeply, eliminating much of it with a single exhale.

“Caught up to him after he wrecked Chilton’s shit.”, the Brujah continued. “Come to find out, Gideon was leader to his own squad of thin-bloods.”

Freddie frowned but Matthew looked at Brujah was both shock and denial. Brian narrowed his eyes towards the Anarch leader. Matthew knew from just the look alone, Zeller wasn’t lying. Gideon wasn’t a favorite amongst the Anarchs, but he was an Anarch nevertheless. For him to sire caitiffs or thin-bloods left a deep, wrenching nausea brewing in Matthew’s gut.

“Where is he now?”, Freddie pressed, tending to the dripping wounds on Brian’s exposed arms. “Is he out still out th-“

“He’s dead.”

Matthew swallowed and Freddie raised her hands up.

“What do you mean he’s dead?”, Freddie interrogated. “Dead as in final…”

“Yes.”, Brian wiped the blood caked around his nostrils.

“It was the only choice.”, the remnants of the cigarette withered into a shortened stub which the Brujah promptly flicked away. “Gideon’s dead and the Camarilla doesn’t know.”

“They always know.”, Freddie muttered. “Always fucking know.”

Matthew cringed, but didn’t press the issue further. He would address it another night as both him and Brian were battered from head to toe. Freddie didn’t seem bothered by the news, but she was an expert on feinting her true emotions. She helped Brian to swing his legs onto the couch and the Brujah thanked her. She leaned over him to lay a gentle kiss on his brow. She wished the both a good night and disappeared into the club space.

Matthew sat with the Brujah for a few moments more before they spoke to one another.

“About the fledgling…”, Matthew started, gauging Brian’s response.

Brian darted his eyes towards Matthew but closed them with a pained expression.

“The kid’s alright.”, Brian mumbled, tucking his hands underneath his arm pits. “Hard to understand, but he’s alright.”

“Is he Anarch material?”

Brian chuckled but grimaced at the sharp pain of his broken rib still poking out from his flesh.

“He’s just a kid just like you and Freddie.”

“That’s not what I asked, Brian.”, Matthew crossed his arms. “Tell me about him.”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed but I got a rib sticking out here.”, Brian shifted uncomfortably. “…you’re always chatty after you get your teeth kicked in.”

Matthew furrowed his brows.

“Again, is he Anarch material?”

The Brujah sighed and attempted to make himself comfortable on the couch.

“You’ll see, Matt. For right now, he’s just a kid.”, Brian would speak no further about Will or his would-be political leanings. “Just, let me fucking sleep…”

Matthew didn’t press any further given that the Brujah was falling asleep on him. He could’ve pressed more, but Matthew wasn’t in a state for another fight. Instead, he went to sit down on the other love seat to retire for the evening. He’ll eventually meet Will Graham to truly test if he was on the path of the Anarch, but they had internal disturbances to solve first. To lose Gideon especially in such a manner wounded them, but his actions had indirectly strained their plans.

If the Brujah was right about Gideon fathering thin-bloods, they had a much messier situation to clean-up. He'd address it the entire Movement another night preferably when none of them were beaten and bruised. Whether or not the Anarchs would choose Matthew's proposed plan of action was up to the lot of them.

After all, they still had choices to make…

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal needs better hobbies.

Again, see you next update.

Auspex

Chapter Summary

Will meets with Bedelia. Chilton is reminded of his failures.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for descriptions of wounds/blood/and gore. Please continue with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VII

“Auspex”

The blankets wrapped around his body felt like they were cooking him alive as sweat puddled underneath him. Will yanked them off him and towards the edge of the elongated bed as the pillows seemed to be just as hot. Frustrated, Will raised up to free himself from the constrictive fabrics. The darkened bedroom was eerily silent as Will wiped the sleep from his eyes. His mind was idle of voices whispering at him and it was rather peaceful to have a moment to himself.

He had slept the entire night, at least, that’s what it felt like.

He had dreamt.

His dream was rather cryptic. He tried to remember the few fragments he could, but nonetheless, the dream fled him. Yet his fingers tingled at the anticipation of something he couldn’t be sure he was expecting. His clothes stuck to him and he peeled free from them. He felt rested for once. He swung his legs over to the side of the bed and fine carpet tickled beneath his toes. He stood up to be illuminated by an orange glow of a lone lamp. His throat felt parched, but he couldn’t necessarily step stark-naked around the Prince’s house.

Or would he mind that?

The thought left a sour taste in Will’s mouth as he turned around to approach a door on the far side of the room. He twisted the knob and to his relief, there was a bathroom fully equipped with toiletries and a change of clothes. In the middle laid a claw-foot, marbled tub

filled with cooling water. An earthy, natural scent perfumed off the water as Will did not hesitate to fully submerge himself under the water. Without the need to hold his breathe, Will remained under the water for an indefinite amount of time. The water sloshed from the sides, but the fledgling did not care, rather, the Prince would have someone clean it up after him. In this moment, he was as tranquil as the water's edge. His eyes lidded then closed as he remained at the bottom of the tub. Near instantly, he went into a lax hibernation.

When he opened his eyes, however, he was bombarded with glimpses of burning cityscapes, devils with fangs as long as stakes, and streets flooded with boiling blood. He opened his mouth to yell, but only water sloshed painfully down his throat. He attempted to yank himself from the water only to feel shackled back down into the depths. He squeezed his eyes shut and when he tried to open them again, he was shown more flashes of destruction. He bolted upright from the water gasping and his body flailing over the side of the tub. His chest felt hot and ragged as water came forth from inside.

Will composed himself after long, passing moments but when he lifted his eyes — they widened in horror. Standing over him was a man's figure, wrapped in cloth, but dripping blood from head to toe. His hair fell in long, bloodied tendrils that obscured everything but his troublesome smile. He appeared to be casted from bloodied marble as only purple eyes peered down at the fledgling in the bathtub. Will twisted his lips to cry out, but the bloody man cusped his chin as he knelt. Will was forced to look into those darkening, purple eyes and he felt all his vitality drain from his body.

"When the gilded box is opened and the caitiff are born amidst blood and brimstone, you shall know where all Kindred must go.", the man foreboded, his tone hollow and haunting.

"For I am the end of all beings.", blood dribbled from the sides of the man's mouth.

Will didn't understand such a cryptic warning, but the grip cusping his chin weakened, and he was able to wretch his head free. The bleeding figure only closed his eyes and as soon as he appeared, he dissipated into a pool of bubbling blood on the tiled floor. Will furiously rubbed his eyes till he saw sparkling specks in his vision.

Yet, there was no pool of blood, only bloodied fingerprints on his cheeks. Will swallowed and frantically surveyed the room. He was alone once again but rather than returning to his now disturbed bath, he quickly got out and dried off. He didn't bother to fix his appearance as the clothes waiting for him nearby slipped onto his body for a perfect fit. His curls dripped as he fled the bathroom, but he did not care. He shut the bathroom door behind him and slid down onto the floor. He sighed in disbelief, but it turned into a snicker, then his head thrown back in laughter.

I've lost my mind. Will wrapped his arms around his body as he laughed.

He only stopped when he heard footsteps approaching the bedroom door.

The steps ceased and Will held a gasp behind his lips. Yet, he was left undisturbed and the steps echoed away. The fledgling remained on the floor with only his mind to begin their careless whispers into his eardrums. Whomever appeared before him, whether real or an apparition of his worsening mind, left him shaking down in his core. Paralyzed and uncertain

he could even stand, Will remained balled up against the door with only the orange glow his company.

Chilton was nervous, rightfully so, as he was seated across Hannibal in his ornate office. He had his cane tucked underneath his arm. He felt under dressed as the office was meticulously glamoured with treasures of all kinds. The Prince was dressed in all black save for his tie and pocket square; a stark contrast to his occasional attire.

Behind him, Jack stood silently and recorded every movement the good doctor made. However, Chilton couldn't move much given that his body was bandaged from head to toe. His face, something he used to take pride in, had been casted in bandages only to reveal his eyes, nostrils, and lips. Everything had swelled once the initial trauma passed. Even so, the good doctor couldn't imagine how horrendous he looked to his Prince across the desk.

Hannibal Lecter was stunning to look at and it made Chilton cower further in his own suit. His silvery-white hair gelled back just behind his ears, how his lips parted even when didn't speak, and his captivating aura truly entranced Dr. Chilton. In a deep, profound way, Chilton could say he was quite jealous of the Prince.

The Prince was expressionless except for his eyes casually drifting up and down Chilton's appearance. Without words, Hannibal conveyed everything Chilton needed to know in this moment; he wasn't worthy to be sitting in the chair he was in. Chilton swallowed a hard lump in his throat and unfastened his jacket button. Hannibal looked further away to the yellow-white lights of Baltimore's cityscape besides them. The doctor only grew embarrassed as the wounds, still healing all over his face, had begun to ooze and soak the bandages.

The Prince politely smiled towards Chilton much to the doctor's surprise.

"You're healing well, Dr. Chilton", the Prince commented, pointing out the returning familiarity to Chilton's features.

Chilton would never look how he once did the night prior, but it was soothing to hear the Prince's cool tone. He chuckled softly, but a tinge of pain interrupted it.

"Thank you, my Prince.", Chilton rasped, feeling dryness tinge on his lips.

Hannibal's eyes crinkled whenever he smiled and Chilton couldn't help but twinkle when he had the privilege of seeing them. However, the smile was short-lived and the Prince returned to a slight frown.

"I'll be frank with you, my favored ghoul.", Hannibal's tone took a cold, unnerving pitch. "I'm very disappointed."

Chilton minimized into a speck of dirt in a matter of seconds as Hannibal lifted his chin to peer down at the doctor. He wasn't used to being scolded. He swallowed a thick lump of anxiety threatening to gag him and remained relatively composed. Dr. Chilton wasn't quick to bring to tears, but he couldn't meet Hannibal's eyes. However, he had to answer to Hannibal or risk his own demise in the very seat he sat in.

“My Prince, if I may explain…”, his words trailed off as he caught a glimpse of Jack coming to Hannibal’s side. He pursed his bruised lips as the bodyguard scrutinized him with jaded eyes.

“No, you may not.”, Hannibal retorted, forcing Chilton to complete silence. “You shall listen and obey.”

Chilton nodded and prepared for the verbal lashing of the century. He’s seen Hannibal discontent, especially with those around him, but never once did he imagine that Hannibal’s discontent would waiver over to him. He had done anything the Prince had requested — some deeds more heinous than others. For the Prince to be angry with him, especially given Chilton almost died, shattered him. He wanted to placate the situation and offer his penance to Hannibal, but when Chilton looked at Hannibal — there was nothing more than contempt in those rich maroon eyes.

“Recover what little dignity you have left and fix your mistakes.”, the Prince began. “Do this, and I’ll consider granting you my vitae.”

Chilton’s mouth watered at the promise of Hannibal’s vitae — his own royal blood dribbling on his lips. He was only granted the privilege ever so often, but Chilton cherished every time. Without Hannibal’s blood, he’d wither and eventually age to bones. Frederick didn’t want to imagine himself as the frail old man he fought the ravages of time to avoid looking like. Chilton respectfully rose from his chair and bowed his aching body to Hannibal.

“I promise, my Prince.”, the words fumbled from his lips like falling dishes. “I won’t fail you again.”

“Of course you won’t, Frederick.”, Hannibal’s tone lifted into an airy huff. “Or I’ll kill you.”

It wasn’t a veiled threat, rather, Hannibal didn’t *make* threats. Chilton swallowed and bowed respectfully. He didn’t need to be told twice of his failures as he cowered away.

Chilton walked backwards towards the office door whilst still bowed. Outside the office and the doors closed in front of him is when he exhaled in relief. As courteous and regal Hannibal was, he was as sadistic as vampires came. He wouldn’t fail Hannibal, no, should he want to preserve his unnatural life. He hobbled to the lobby and to a car waiting for him on the city street. He ushered the driver to return him home. He was still unnerved with Hannibal’s disappointment.

He wouldn’t fail his Prince, not again.

Bedelia wasn’t a woman of regret or did she poise herself to dwell on the past. Whereas others became disgraced from their past, she rose far beyond her station.

She grew up to be beautiful as well as cunning, slighting her adversaries, and curtseying to her familiars. She possessed grace as well as wrath — though sometimes there wasn’t a clear distinction between the two. She graduated the highest in her class long beyond her high

school years, delved into her studies of the human psyche, and would eventually become a respected scholar in the field.

However, she grew bored of the constant praise and adoration from her peers and would-be suitors alike. They meant well, but their praise went on deaf ears as she did not need constant validation from her lessers. In the years following, she was courted and desired though many of her suitors only desired her fertility rather than her intellect.

She married a said suitor, but only bore him sickly, misshaped husks of what would've been offspring. She didn't shed a tear or lost a night's sleep, though, she played her dutiful role as the mourning mother exceptionally well. It wasn't in her great interest to further a man's progeny especially when no man within her circle could dream to aspire beyond his station. After so many said births, she was divorced but neither her fortune nor her dignity was stripped of her. Rather, she was granted a mansion of her own overlooking the Chesapeake.

With her renown, she was invited to many dinner parties and receptions, but it was only one she accepted the invite of. She wouldn't have accepted it otherwise if she hadn't heard of a certain stranger attending said event. Hannibal Lecter's name echoed from mouth to mouth in hushed adoration and sourness of jealously. Bedelia had heard nothing of him prior to their fated meeting, but she was a succubus for good conversation. She watched him whether it was partaking in drink or in banter with groveling cowards. Even from far away, he noticed her gaze from across the room.

She would admit he was quite stunning to look at; better up close. He was well-dressed, awfully so, as the other men in the room seemed to be peasantry in his presence. He was as young as the wine in their cups, but his eyes were what gravitated Bedelia towards him. They were clear, void of any distinction of want or envy. She admired that in a man who knew what he already had. She would be courteous, but not overly flirtatious. After all, she was a divorcee and not a virgin pure.

Though it was Hannibal who wooed her instead.

He was a patron of the finer arts, a man of great education, and the only one in the room that could see past the wine and babbles. He was down-to-earth, though he elevated himself much higher, and Bedelia naturally admired him. They talked endlessly as the night grew into dawn, but Hannibal remained and indulged her in satisfying conversation. She did not expect to discover his nightly affliction as in her world, his kind didn't exist. However, she couldn't deny his immortality as he couldn't join her for breakfast.

As childish as that sounded to her then, Bedelia only realized it now that Hannibal wasn't someone she could take to brunch or run mid-day errands with. They couldn't tour Baltimore in the heat of the day let alone in the morning hours. He was a denizen of the night whereas she was a citizen of the day. It bothered her in the beginning of their relationship; the lack of places they could be together. Yet, Hannibal didn't seem to mind, or, he didn't express his resentment at their situation. Instead, he only amplified his efforts to court her.

Since then, they were inseparable many a night Bedelia visited him in his lonesome penthouse, or she invited him into her equally lonesome home. Their relationship evolved into a matter of physicality that at least for the most part, Bedelia enjoyed. She began to

attend his nightly conferences and remained an advisor. Her presence had been protested many times by other, lesser vampires but Hannibal curbed all their criticisms.

Though over a handful of years, Bedelia had considered that Hannibal's immortality bored him. Hannibal was an obsessive creature. He infatuated himself on a whim, but then grew terribly morose once he no longer desired the obsession. Since he could not die naturally, he had to bide his time with anything that stimulated his interest. First, it was hobbies but once he had learned every skill, it was child's play. Bedelia did her best to keep him entertained with the politics of her own world, but Hannibal wasn't interested in kine.

Hannibal enjoyed the beauty in things, however, and he was a collector of fine paintings. He'd hang them up as quick as the seasons changed, but eventually he would donate them after his interest subsided. Many a gallery in Baltimore paid homage to Hannibal's generous donations.

Bedelia could say the same about the fledgling Hannibal had spared. She would admit the fledgling was beautiful, in a boyish sense, but nothing overly unique. Eventually, Hannibal would discard him yet it bothered her deeply that Hannibal's interest in Will Graham was overwhelmingly rising.

In fact, it *enraged* her.

Bedelia let herself into Hannibal's penthouse with her own key and as quiet as it was, she had doubted if Hannibal was home. She left her long, delicate fur jacket on the chaise and walked to the bar. She poured her drink and enjoyed it as she looked at the overcast brewing over the city skyline. She wasn't possessive or desperate for validation, but she couldn't shake the feeling she was being disposed. Her drink became tart on her tongue and she ceased in partaking. From across the penthouse, she heard a door softly close behind itself and she stood.

Around the corner, the thinnish figure of what she abhorred revealed himself from the dark. She pursed her lips as Will made his way across the penthouse, deft on his feet, not noticing Bedelia's presence at the bar. She smirked as Will fled, but once he had begun to climb the stairs to the front door — She called for him. He spun around and was surprised by her presence and for a moment, they shared longing eye contact. His eyes were a stormy-grey shade, but flecks of gold had begun to outline the rims.

"Good evening, Will.", Bedelia greeted, gesturing for the fledgling to join her at the bar. "I hope I didn't frighten you."

He hesitated perhaps considering whether to contend with Bedelia. The latter happened and Will joined her at the bar. He was zealously cautious not to be within reach of Bedelia as he seemed to shy further away from her. She'd admit that he was stunning in the faint light over the bar, but his eyes told something far more feral was underneath his skin. Bedelia could whip herself believing Hannibal would want anything to do with something as volatile and fractured as the fledgling vampire in front of her.

"Do you care for a drink?", it was joke, and Bedelia was granted upturned eyebrows from Will. "Perhaps of a particular vintage."

“I rather not…”, to hear Will’s voice was a surprise to Bedelia — it was fair-toned and soft. “I should be going…”

“So soon? Please, stay. I’m sure Hannibal would appreciate our company.”

Will flinched and reluctantly took a seat at the bar counter. He fidgeted nervously with the cuff of his shirt and refused to make eye contact again with Bedelia. She wondered what else could she do to make the fledgling finally unravel in on himself. However, she had to be cautious as she was a mortal woman and he a predator.

“Sadly, we haven’t been properly introduced. I’m Bedelia Du Maurier.”, Bedelia began to gauge Will’s mannerisms. “I’m afraid the trial wasn’t the best of times to meet.”

Will acknowledged her with a simple nod but his gaze was longing towards the front door. Occasionally, he watched Bedelia as she paced around the open living space or venture into the kitchen, but never once did he move from his seat. It made no difference to Bedelia, of course, as she was familiar with this space and he was the outlier.

“I hope we are not on sour terms, Will. I’d like to think of us as mutuals.”, admits Bedelia, calculating the slight rise and fall of Will’s chest as he huffed.

That suggestion earned a scowl from Will, but he did not react further. Instead, he kept himself guarded.

“Hannibal sees greatness in you.”, Bedelia continued, sauntering around the living room. “However, I believe he’s misplaced his expectations.”

Will pursed his lips, but again, didn’t argue against her accusations. It was annoying not having the fledgling quarrel her attacks. He basically rolled over and took the blunt of her sharp tongue. She could see it in his eyes that he wanted to spit the same venomous rhetoric, but he kept silent. His eyes told everything she needed to know — he would remember this encounter, vehemently so.

“Who am I to judge his decisions, Will? I believe if he truly sees you worthy, then you’ll fulfill your purpose in due time.”, says Bedelia, finding herself abandoning her drink for the sake of conversation.

“And your purpose?”, Will interrupted, turning to face Bedelia in the middle of the living room. “I didn’t expect the Prince to humor himself with a paramour given our affliction…”

“Or are you his dinner?”, his tone was jaded, almost accusatory. “He must take joy fattening up such a prime cut.”

That wounded Bedelia. Outwardly, she brushed off Will’s harsh criticism, but it would scar her temporarily. Her and Hannibal were more than sexual rendezvous; they were the same side of a two-faced coin. For Will to suggest her place as a mere concubine was offensive, but to further insult her as an outsider to their society was heinous. She gave Will the benefit of the doubt that he had wounded her and excused herself to the kitchen.

She would remember this encounter.

On her return, however, Will had vanished. The only trace of his presence was the chair he didn’t push back in. Bedelia scoffed and took a glance to the front door hardly cracked. His tongue was sharp, but his legs were cowardly. He’d return, eventually, as Hannibal had ever-so-pressing need for his attendance. Bedelia would be there, watching him, gauging his temperament. Should she be possessed to whisper into Hannibal’s ear, she couldn’t wait to feel the hot ash of the fledgling’s final death in the air.

Should she resort to wrath rather than grace.

Chapter End Notes

I won't ever let Chilton catch a break. Never.

See you next update.

Placenta

Chapter Summary

The Anarchs are embolden to take a stance against the Camarilla as Will witnesses firsthand the cruel nature of the world of darkness.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings for descriptions of violence. Please continue with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VIII
“Placenta”

Brian awoken to a painful, thumping rhythm bouncing across his temples. He could only curl his body inwards as the aching pain blistering across his face became blinding hot. He squeezed his eyes as tightly as they could till the pain became a numbing ache. The couch underneath him felt hardened. He rose up and glanced across the room — finding that he was alone in the darkened room. He swung his legs over and groaned.

He could only think of Will in this moment. He wasn’t a pessimist, or did he fret over things out of his control, but he felt particularly responsible for Will’s well-being. In the least amount of words, Will was like a progeny Brian had never sired. Their bloodlines differed, but it was through mutuality that Brian could call Will his friend. He felt it was his sole responsibility to keep Will alive as much as the forces outside of their control contested. Will was a smart kid and he could save himself — but, Brian didn’t want to imagine Will alone for a second longer.

Once he got himself together, he would scour the streets for Will. He’d return to the apartment and if he wasn’t there, Brian would walk as many blocks as it took to track Will down.

Likewise, Will would do the same for him, or Brian hoped he would.

Brian lifted his spotted shirt. His rib had sunken back into place, a boon of immortality, and only a reddish bruise was left instead. His fingers floated over the bruise, but he was interrupted when he heard a knock at the door. He watched the door open to reveal Matthew in the doorway. The Anarch had changed his clothes and showered — a rarity for Matthew

given his drunken stupors disabled him from doing anything productive for himself. He came in with a blood bag in hand. He threw it to the older Brujah and Brian accepted it.

“Good evening, Dracula.”, Matthew greeted, noticing how sluggish Brian appeared to be as he feasted on the blood bag.

Brian finished the bag in mere swallows and discarded the plastic pouch. He averted his attention to the Anarch and grimaced. Of all things, he would rather remain at rest, but with Matthew in a sober mood — that only meant work. He did have that glitter to his eye, something Brian hadn’t seen in a very long time, and he seemed to be in a bright mood. Freddie called for them upstairs and the both of them joined the female Anarch.

In front of them was a large, round table with knives stabbed into the solid wood. Words had been etched onto the surface as well as many a beer stain making darkened rings. Freddie had stretched a long map of the city of Baltimore across the table. Brian eyeballed the circled sections of the map, including The Last Call, and took notice of her notes on the sidelines.

Explosives. Brian never had formal training in using explosives, but he was a fan of the occasional molotov cocktail. Matthew’s military background and Freddie’s knowledge of where to find materials to make such explosives outweighed anything Brian knew. He was a simple Anarch of simpler means, but Freddie and Matthew took their Anarchism to astronomical finesse. Freddie had began to lay the groundwork for what her and Matthew had devised overnight and Brian faithfully listened.

It was simple: detonate explosives at the marked explosions. The locations, though, weren’t so simple in theory. They were businesses owned by kine in service to kindred, in particular, Hannibal Lecter. Vampires were immortal, but not eternally wealthy. They were bond to the rules of kine society in terms of finances. In order for the Camarilla to keep its chokehold over the city, they needed money. Money fueled their enterprises beyond the city limits of Baltimore. Since vampires couldn’t necessarily run their own businesses without the suspicion of wandering eyes, they enthralled kine into giving over most of their profit. It was rather a disgusting business practice but nonetheless, the Camarilla constantly had a positive cashflow.

That said cashflow funded their fascist regime and kept the Anarchs at a rough precipice. Their own finances came from more lucrative, not-so-legal means of drug sales, gun running, and the occasional strip club. Freddie explained the details thoroughly as Matthew had already prepared the devices they were going to use. Brian agreed with the plan, but only on the condition none of their actions would affect Will. After all, it was Will still tangled in the Prince’s grasp, not him, Freddie, or Matthew.

“There’s no guarantee this won’t backfire on every single vampire in this city, Brian.”, Matthew suggested, pointing out the extensiveness this planned attack was. “Not just Will Graham.”

Brian frowned, but would not budge on his proposition. Freddie, to his surprise, agreed that it was in their best interest to not involve Will.

“He’s our only way in and out the Camarilla, Matt.”, she began to reason with the Anarch leader, as Brian read over the details of their assignment.

“We haven’t gotten this close to Hannibal in years. Think about it.”

Matthew had thought about it — Brian could see it in his posture. Matthew was as uncomfortable with the things beginning to be set in motion, but he couldn’t pass the opportunity to sabotage the Camarilla. As word began to spread about a cursed sarcophagus and more Camarilla officials flooding into Baltimore, this night was perhaps the only night they could make their true Anarch presence known.

“When are we leaving?”, Brian asked.

“Tonight.”, the Anarchs said in unison.

The Brujah grimaced, but Matthew and Freddie already seemed geared up to leave. Freddie rolled up the city map as Matthew left the room to grab their supplies. Brian met them downstairs at the bar as the hangover partygoers from the other night remained passed-out either on the floor or across the couches. He went outside to wait in the alleyway and his fellow Anarchs loaded their vehicle. He hoped Will was somewhere safe though ironically, the fledgling wasn’t safe anywhere in Baltimore. The last thing Brian needed was more blood on his hands.

The Anarchs were soon in the vehicle and with Matthew at the wheel, Freddie and Brujah remained in the back with boxes full of explosives needing to be programmed. It was rather hard to do since Matthew’s driving techniques were far from safe to be doing such a task, but nevertheless Freddie managed to get most of them rigged. Brian kept his attention towards the streets with a sliver of hope that he would see Will.

Baltimore was cold, much colder than what Will remembered. He stood outside of the Prince’s tower as his skin was dotted with goosebumps. The streets were filled with people in passing cars or chatting away on their balconies. They were boisterous in their wealth. Many a bottle of champagne was popped whilst high-end restaurants catered to patrons. Will only watched in idle interest as he walked past.

He wasn’t a fan of this city, let alone a fan of Hannibal’s penthouse, and no less of a fan of people with cruel intentions. The Prince’s paramour, Bedelia, was no less of a villain than a mutual friend. She was politely cruel, and Will saw directly through her shroud.

He couldn’t sit there a moment longer whilst she lashed him with her veiled threats. He harbored no hatred for her, but he wasn’t in the mood to be patronized.

He opened the folder he had tucked under his arm and scanned over the photographs. Whether or not he could investigate a rather puzzling map of photographs, news clippings, and rumors, time would tell. He closed it and crossed the street.

Passersby avoided him on the street. They walked around him rather than next to him. As if he had a wafting aroma of decay masked on him, people quickly made distance between

themselves and him. Their cautious glances to see where he was only soured Will's mood further. He heard their faint heartbeats drumming in their chests, how their veins tightened as the blood constricted, and their fleeting thoughts.

He wasn't like them — He only imitated.

He no longer had the need to breathe, blink, or eat. He simply existed in a husk of a mortal body. It was startling to realize how distant he had started to become to the idea of mortality. Just two nights prior he was wishing for death, but now he was apathetic to the suggestion.

It was unnerving, to say the least.

On the other hand, he was thirsty. He was the only person currently on the street. He was unfamiliar with this area of downtown; high-rise apartments surrounded him on both sides void of any indication of where he was. He tried to pace back, but he was rather lost. Will huffed and kept walking. Eventually, he'd recognize a familiar landmark, but hopefully before sunrise.

He passed by a woman bundled up in head to toe save her face. She was pushing a stroller in front of her — the basket enclosed by a thin sheer of fabric. Her cheeks were beginning to redden by the frost in the air, but her smile was warm as her eyes was down casted towards the stroller. She cooed a series of words in a foreign language and Will heard her as they passed one another. She acknowledged his presence with a polite smile, but casted her eyes back down to the stroller as she passed.

Will caught a glance of the delicate, pinkish newborn swaddled rather warmly in winter attire. The baby's heartbeat was strong and healthy. It took every ounce of willpower and morality Will possessed to not let it stir his hunger even further. He gnawed on his bottom lip.

He wasn't a monster.

The mother and newborn became distant behind him as Will was going to cross another street to retrace his steps. However, a shrill cry echoed in the night followed by a loud slam. He turned his head towards the commotion only to find that the mother was gone except for an overturned stroller. Instantly, Will threw the folder underneath his arm and raced across the street only to find the stroller void of the baby. He looked towards the nearby alleyway as another harsh cry came from the pitch darkness. Will didn't hesitate to race headfirst down the alleyway. For whatever reason, the voices plaguing him urged him to take action.

The smell of fresh blood wafted up his nostrils and he paused. He felt his tongue slither to lick his drying lips. In the darkness, he saw a faint outline of the mother's body down on the concrete. He went down to his knees to where she lied frightened and gasping. Blood had fountained from her mouth with every gasp as even in the darkness, Will could make out the long, fleshy tendrils of her intestines pooling onto her side. He held his composure as her gasps became sighs, then silence.

"I'm sorry.", his voice trembled with a mixture of moroseness and anger. "I'm so fucking sorry."

He clenched his fists tightly. Tears forced themselves out from his eyes in hot, blotchy marks down his cheeks. He looked up once he heard the faintest, little cry of the newborn resonating off the grimy brick stones. He got up again to trek to the sound but was only met with a dead end. Above him was a spotlight blaring harsh, white light on top of him. The only thing in front of him was a sewer cover, slightly shifted, and Will didn't hesitate to open it further.

The descend was a short one as in mere seconds, Will was ankle deep in murky, grey water. The scent was horrible — worse than anything Will had ever smelled in his life. Rats waddled on the surface of the water. His nausea only worsened as he had to waddle through the elongated tunnel of filth. The newborn's cries only grew more distant and against his own disgust, Will forced himself to run through the murk.

The tunnels started to become a winding maze and with only the newborn's cries as his guide, Will's adrenaline only skyrocketed. He had not a clue what he was walking into, but he'd be damned if he couldn't save the child. The tunnel opened into a wider four-way and Will stood in the middle. From his right, he heard the newborn as clear as day, but from the left it echoed off the grimy walls. Trusting his own intuition, he went with the opening to his right. Towards the end of the tunnel, he was met with a large opening of standing water.

On the paved walkway, he saw a figure hunched over with its back facing Will. It was grotesque, in so many words, with sickly grey skin. It was only clothed in ripped clothing to reveal patches of wispy, white hair but it was the appendages that startled Will. They were claw-like, hardly resembling a human hand, and much longer than Will's arms. Will waddled closer only for the figure to stand upright from its painful, contoured arch.

The Malkavian bared his fangs as the figure revealed itself to be a malformed imitation of what looked to be a man. The skin, almost translucent, was curled back from the eye sockets and around the mouth. A pair of ears curled inwards and seemed to melt into the skin. The newborn baby was still swaddled in winter clothes as the hunchback villain bore his own set of fangs back — long, yellowing jaws of jagged teeth.

A vampire. Will hadn't seen a vampire look as monstrous as the one in front of him and he wasn't certain it was a vampire to begin with. He eyed the viciously long fangs and beady yellow eyes the villain had, but didn't make the first move. The monster hunkered back down and closed his mouth. He only stared at Will with hungry eyes.

The same kind of hungry eyes Will had.

"We are one of the same, kindred.", the monster said to him, but his tone was a garbled mess of syllables. "You're a child of Malkav, yes?"

Will didn't respond promptly as his eyes focused on the newborn fussing around in their swaddling clothes. Against all his voices urging him to snatch the newborn from the deviant, he remained as still as the water lapped around his ankles.

"You're hungry, yes?", the strange-looking vampire implied. "Please, have your fill."

Bile threatened to expunge from his stomach, but Will steeled himself.

“The youngest are always the tastiest.”

That suggestion threw Will over the edge. Soon he was up on the pavement heading straight for the crouching vampire. His opponent only howled and braced for Will’s charge — both tumbling off the elevated pavement and back into the sewer sludge. Will felt hardened nails dig into the flesh of his back, but he opened his mouth to sink into flesh. The taste that flooded in his mouth was stale, almost as bad as the water around them. They tussled with one another till they were both upright with Will straddling his opponent’s back.

I’m no monster.

Will reminded himself as his teeth began to render flesh from the body. The first chunk was spat out, but the second and third Will had swallowed during the tussle. It tasted as foul as it looked.

The misshapen vampire, at this point, was wailing at Will and frantically trying to throw the fledgling off him. Will didn’t disengage as his fangs became deeply embedded into the doughy flesh of the villain’s shoulder. He ingested more flesh. It took a few more hard, jostled bucks in order to force Will off the vampire. He fled onto the pavement where the newborn had begun to cry in earnest. He hunkered over it as one of his curved claws hovered dangerously close to the baby.

Will snarled at his foe.

“You deny me of my nourishment, Malk?”, the vampire questioned. “Who are you?”

The fledgling said nothing, but licked the blackish blood smeared around his lips. It was a stale taste and it reminded Will of black licorice. Secretly, it wasn’t such a bad taste.

“We, the Nosferatu, will not forget you.”, the Nosferatu warned, his beady eyes becoming full like saucers. He gave one last, hunger stare towards the crying newborn before scurrying lightning fast from the scene.

Will was going to run after the assailant, but he couldn’t keep up with such speed. Instead, he went to where the newborn fussed. On further examination, the newborn was a baby girl — wisps of blonde hair peaking from underneath the swaddling clothes. He picked her up with bloodied hands and sighed. She was a delicate thing and Will held her close to his chest. She was warm, fondly warm, and the fledgling fought the urge to not hold her too tightly.

He waddled through the filthy water to where he entered the sewer. He carefully ascended the ladder to the surface. He emerged from the bowels of Baltimore covered in grime and blood. His curls were heavy with things Will didn’t want to visualize. His wounds were deep and ached, but his adrenaline kept him upright. The newborn was quiet except for a few hiccups here and there. He wasn’t willing to let her go either — finding that it was comforting having her in his arms. However, his hunger still stirred, and he was a predator; she, prey.

Nearby, sirens had blared as crime scene tape had sectioned off the alleyway ahead of Will. He hid behind a corner and saw the newborn’s mother being whisked away into the coroner’s van. A team of detectives were already on scene documenting the evidence. The baby girl

had begun to fuss and Will tried to quiet her, and to no avail, she only grew louder. Soon, the detectives would hear hem both. His discovered presence would be taken wrongly as he was in the possession of the child. Against his better judgement, he delicately sat the baby girl on the concrete. His chest felt tight as he made distance between her and him. Before he absconded from the now active crime scene, he banged his fist against a nearby trash can.

The sound alerted the detectives and Will was out of sight. Behind him, he saw a detective rush to where he laid the baby girl. Relief cooled his heated nerves and Will escaped the alleyway. The pain had started to seep in as the adrenaline was short-lived. His sides bled as well as the scratches and abrasions on his face and arms. He'd lick his wounds once he returned to his apartment. For a brief moment, he thought of Brian but the thought dissipated as his body screamed for retirement.

Hurt and weary, his aching legs carried him off into the night.

The explosives were set to explode momentarily as the trio of Anarchs had front row seats to the fireworks show. They sat in the back of the van with beers shared between them. Where they parked, they would have front row seats of the carnage they were about to detonate. The detonator laid in Freddie's lap, but it was Matthew who was given the privilege.

Brian eyed the detonator as it was passed to his fellow Anarch. He'd seen it in the movies, but the detonator was nowhere near the size portrayed in film. Just a small box with a button in the middle — nothing more, nothing less. Matthew ran his finger pad over the small button and kept his gaze outwards to the Chesapeake. Freddie finished her beer and threw it out onto the concrete.

"Once we do this, there's no turning back.", Matthew began, teasing his finger dangerously hard on the button. He turned to the Anarchs sitting beside him.

"You can't pussy yourselves out of this.", the Brujah warned. "The real question is – are you ready, Matthew?"

"I'm sure.", Matthew replied, looking at Brian with a bit of boyish confidence gleaming in his eyes.

Freddie was zealously committed to their plan of action, but Brian had his hesitations. He wasn't a fan of performative anarchism, rather, he was direct with his actions. Sure, they could destroy a series of businesses Hannibal had engagements with, but that wouldn't phase the Camarilla vice grip over Baltimore. It would take more to cripple the Camarilla – but in the meantime, it would get their attention.

Brian gave Matthew his blessings with the ignition of his cigarette. Freddie gleefully watched as Matthew pressed his finger fully on the detonator. In a matter of seconds, a crescendo of explosions erupted into the night's air — each one sounding closer as they went off. In front of them, a plum of harsh orange light lapped up at the sky and the sound of glass crashing was a welcomed sound. People nearby screamed and ran away, but all around was buildings crashing towards the dirt. Matthew threw the detonator out towards the parking lot and stood to watch the ensuing destruction. He howled at the top of his lungs and Freddie joined him.

Brian sat back to clap. Downtown was alive with wildfire as blaring sirens became ever so intimate. They stirred the pot of a burning soup and even Brian was impressed with the outcome. Nearby, a transformer combusted and sent a powerline down into the street. Cars screeched to a halt before crashing into one another. As Freddie and Matthew danced to the carnage, Brian laid back with his cigarette curling.

The Anarchs hooped and hollered into the night as the city began to collapse around them.

“Well, that’s a start.”, Brian commented as his fellow Anarchs celebrated the destruction.

“Let’s keep it going.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the support.

Ikizukuri

Chapter Summary

Hannibal meets with a foreign Prince as an unfortunate series of events unfolds in Baltimore.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for graphic sex and potential violence. Please continue with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

IX
“Ikizukuri”

Hannibal sat in annoyed silence as several of his colleagues around him bickered amongst themselves. He was at the head of the table, a privilege of his station, but around him was the squabbling justiciars and constables from the nearby cities. He was more than annoyed, but it was rather amusing to hear the brightest of the Camarilla argue over city blocks like schoolyard children. In the meeting space they communed in, their entranced servants weaved in and out of the room with delicacies served on platters. The attempt on cuisine nauseated Hannibal and with a flick of his hand, forced the servants out of the room.

The squabbling returned to civil conversations between barons, constables, and the few lords in the room. The talk of politics was dull and repetitive as everyone had their own say on the state of affairs. Their aspirations, criticisms, and solutions mattered little.

As optimistic as they seemed to have their opinions, it was ultimately Hannibal’s word that mattered here. However, it was the higher generation who seemed to be the mouthiest of the room. Their youthfulness only exaggerated their ignorance and further fueled the rhetoric circling the table. Their exchanges with the lower generation, their elders, present in the room lead to fangs being drawn, then a brawl, followed by stakes in chests.

The smell of hot ash further spurned Hannibal’s appetite as he covered his nose with the back of his hand. The ashes were quickly swept away by the servants and they were banished back outside the room. Eventually, all parties sat down in their seats save the two meeting their final demise. An air of silence wafted in the room, but even Hannibal found it insufferable. He motioned for discussion and once again, the rhetoric spilled from ambitious lips.

However, there was one pair of bow-like lips pursed together in idled silence. Hannibal looked at the sharply-dressed vampire towards the end of the table — noticing how the vampire looked much like himself minus the lack of wrinkles. A face of alabaster with eyes of cerulean; the vampire was marvelously well-kept and handsome. He was a true Ventrue; his mannerisms were too refined to be of a lesser pedigree. They made eye contact with another, but it was Hannibal who drifted his eyes away. The conversations around the table left a tart taste in Hannibal's mouth and he stood up.

"I thank all of you for sharing your grievances and concerns with me.", began Hannibal. "As upstanding members of our organization, I hold your council deeply."

Lips began to move in approval as well as others in reassurance, but eyes were the most telling. Hannibal only saw apathy and falseness, as expected from his lowers, but he was preaching to the choir. The moment he showed weakness, they would descend and eat him alive. Hannibal had wondered what parts of his flesh they would taste first.

The servants came into the meeting space and began to clear the table, swiveling through the vampires graciously amending each other's grievances. It was all for show, of course, as many of the vampires hated each other's blood. The vampires said their last goodbyes and began to leave the meeting space saved for the one vampire Hannibal locked eyes with.

He stood and approached the Prince — eyes casted downwards in a show of respect. Hannibal could smell the cologne clinging onto dead flesh, but it was a favorable scent of chrysanthemum and sandalwood. He curtly smiled and acknowledge the younger vampire in front of him.

"Prince Lecter.", the accent was of heavy French, old French to be exact. "I'm honored to be in your presence."

"Likewise.", Hannibal greeted, holding out his hand. "I'm afraid we haven't been properly introduced this evening, Prince."

"Lacroix. Sebastian Lacroix.", the Frenchman purred, seemingly elated to be recognized of his station.

Hannibal was surprised at the earliness of Prince Sebastian's arrival — given he was supposed to be in Baltimore in a few more nights. They shook hands once, twice, and broke apart with Lacroix offering to pour Hannibal a drink. The Prince declined the offer but sat back down but this time not at the head of the table. Lacroix poured his own drink and joined Hannibal.

"Forgive them.", Hannibal said, pointing towards the door. "The politics of Baltimore are cruel and often savage."

Sebastian smiled behind the rim of his glass. He finished his drink swiftly with only a rim of red left at the bottom of his glass.

"Los Angeles is no different, Prince Lecter.", Lacroix admitted. "Terribly so as of recent events."

Recent events. Hannibal's eyebrow curled upwards, but he waited for the Prince of Los Angeles to further elaborate. He heard of rumors circulating that the western royalty of the Camarilla had strengthened under Lacroix's regency, but other rumors that he was merely masking problems. Baltimore was no different, but it wasn't home to terrorists and would-be revolutionaries — at least, not the full-front of them.

Los Angeles was home to the Anarchs and birthplace of their movement. Though the Anarchs residing in Baltimore are stark opposites to their more liberal constituents on the west coast, they owed their movement to Los Angeles Anarchs. Lacroix had more than enough resources to dispose of the Anarchs and other rivalries, however, he was overly aloof at the gravity of the mounting situation.

Hannibal also heard the whisperings of Lacroix's sudden succession to royalty. It wasn't without controversy either as many prominent vampires of Los Angeles criticized his ascension. As such, those vampires were met with ostracization and exile. Fitting, but Hannibal preferred his rivals to seethe in his shadow. Tales of murder and backstabbing followed Lacroix but lips never brought the accusation to life. The Prince of Baltimore remained neutral on the subject, but he did have his reservations to the young, prideful Prince of Los Angeles.

In fact, it reminded him so much of his younger self that it would be fitting to steer Lacroix towards a more benevolent, diplomatic rule. With lower generation vampires, they tended to be more impulsive and foolish in their decisions. Their blood drifted far from their forefather and his wisdom too. The notion, however, was rather boring and it would be much more interesting to see Lacroix eaten alive.

As is the Frenchman's way.

"I want to apologize on not heralding my arrival sooner.", Lacroix quipped, the corners of his lips upturning into a polite smile. "I was sight-seeing Baltimore for the last few nights."

Hannibal pursed his lips yet didn't comment on Lacroix's disrespect. To not announce his arrival into Hannibal's domain was an infringement, the least offensive, but still the most offensive in Hannibal's eyes.

"I forgive you, but let us continue our conversation somewhere more respectable.", Hannibal was keen on highlighting his word choice.

Lacroix nodded in agreement as Jack came into the room, holding the large doors open to reveal that the lobby was cleared except for him. Hannibal raise up and fixed the button of his suit. Lacroix did the same and the Prince of Baltimore noted it.

Imitation is sincerest form of flattery.

Hannibal gestured for Lacroix to lead the way and Jack escorted them both downstairs and into the waiting Bentley. Lacroix was a conversationalist — much to Hannibal's annoyance, but the Princeling truly had the gift of gab. He talked further about his own upbringing, then his arrival to the States, and finally his plans for Los Angeles. Hannibal obliged him for a time. His thoughts drifted towards Will.

His chest felt lighter when he thought of the fledgling. He missed how his fingertips danced on the thin, cooled flesh of Will's ankle. To say he was captivated was a stretch, but he hadn't been interest in another creature for many years. Will wouldn't be at the penthouse by the time Hannibal, Lacroix, and Jack arrived, but it did elate him that Will did stay the night. Although coerced into staying, he would press for the fledgling to take permanent residence with him, but it would be unlikely as the Anarchs had already started to drip lies in his naïve ears.

Hannibal could wait for Will. Forever, if that what it took to have him once again slumbering in that bed. The Prince looked to where Lacroix had been staring at him and he smiled.

"Deep in thought?", Lacroix suggested, eyeing how Hannibal's attention was turned elsewhere.

"No, just being a faithful listener.", Hannibal smoothly lied.

The Prince of Los Angeles beamed. However, his cheery expression molded into apathy.

"I'm not going to play *timide* with you, Prince Lecter.", there was a sharp edge in Lacroix's voice that made Hannibal frown. "I'm not here in Baltimore to mingle and make friends."

"I already knew that.", Hannibal retorted, gesturing towards Jack to take them to the penthouse.

"You're here for the sarcophagus, *oui*?", that suggestion earned a flash of teeth from Lacroix.

Sebastian's expression laxed from disturbed into a cynical mask, but Hannibal already knew his answer. He wasn't surprised at that either because it was Lacroix who banished the ship the said sarcophagus was aboard. How childish it was of the Prince of Los Angeles to give away a toy, but then ask for it back. The Prince of Baltimore did not expect for the younger Prince to give him an answer as the car ride was eerily silent.

Hannibal sat with his hands crossed his lap with pride smeared across his face. Lacroix only seethed but remained polite and courteous during the ride. Their car ride, however, turned sour as traffic had congested ahead of them. Hannibal lowered the window to see how much was ahead of them, but his nostrils were assaulted with the hot, suffocating scent of ash and embers.

People on either side of the street was caked in a thick shroud of dust and debris. Police cars and emergency vehicles blocked the way and Jack maneuvered out of the lane they were currently stuck in. Making a sharp right turn, Jack pulled the Bentley off the main street and began to take the back way back to the penthouse.

Lacroix sat in silence, but Hannibal could feel his smirk burning the back of his neck as he watched fires licking the night's sky. He could howl in anger, but kept his wrath constrained as Lacroix wouldn't hesitate to gab to his coconspirators. Once Jack pulled into the lower parking structure of the Lecter Tower, it was Hannibal who let himself out the Bentley and to the elevator. The Prince of Los Angeles was quick to follow behind as well as Jack, but the Prince of Baltimore didn't give second notice to their presence.

In the penthouse, Bedelia was pacing back and forth as the nightly news was blaring from the flat screen television. She was startled on Hannibal's sudden entrance but was relieved when she came straight to him. She caressed his face, but he shooed her away. Sebastian Lacroix introduced himself to Bedelia and excused himself to Hannibal's office. Bedelia nodded as Lacroix bowed as he passed with Jack escorting him.

"Hannibal?", Bedelia asked as another explosion sparked on the television. She whipped her head around and held her gasp as Hannibal looked away from the screen.

"What's going on?", she pointed towards the television. "I could hardly get through the traffic because of this ruckus."

Anarchs. Hannibal could flog himself for being naïve to the Anarchs across the city. Ironic as he was just chastising Lacroix's lack of caution in dealing with the Anarchs in his own city. He knew of Matthew and his raggedy gang of would-be revolutionaries and outcasts, but never once did he suspect Matthew could ever once be so brazen and make the first strike. He considered them nothing more than squabbling children, but with events unfolding — now they were vermin.

The explosions were strategic as Hannibal saw a map of each of the detonations — all his businesses saved for a few burnt to the ground. High-end boutiques, jewelry stores, and the few accounting firms Hannibal personally oversaw was nothing but rumble. Of course, these businesses were ran by the kine he entranced but nevertheless, it was an attempt at disrupting the Camarilla's finances. Matthew Brown was intelligent in his destruction as much as Hannibal hated to admit it. He began to laugh then the laugh turned into a yell of rage.

Bedelia stood warily across the living room. Hannibal huffed and turned away to retreat into his kitchen. His paramour followed close behind and her arms wrapped around his torso from behind. She anchored him there as he could feel her heartbeat pick up in tempo. She whispered sweet nothings into his ear but he could only hear his blood thumping angrily.

She guided him back to the living room to sit and she turned off the television. Even from this high, the flames left the skyline a swirl of orange and violet plumes of smoke. Hannibal unbuttoned his suit and loosened the tie around his neck. His hair had begun to droop from their gelled stance as Bedelia sat next to him. She was warm, as warm as the fires burning outside, and she only became warmer the more Hannibal leaned into her embrace.

"They won't get away with this.", Hannibal said into the crook of Bedelia's neck, his fangs beginning to prick the soft flesh. "I'll kill them all."

Her breath hitched, but she leaned into it.

"I know they wont, my Prince.", she replied, softening herself against Hannibal.

His fangs smoothly pricked Bedelia's neck as a trail of blood lazily began to drool. The first mouthful sated his thirst, but it was the next few that brought him composure. He disengaged as he felt her heartbeat quiver in tempo. He wiped his lips with the pad of his finger as Bedelia motioned for him to continue. He declined, but kept his lips tantalizing close to her flesh.

She invited his hands to unravel her dress, followed by her lips, then her own hands guiding Hannibal over her. How perverted it would be for them to engage in intercourse, especially with Lacroix waiting patiently in his office, but Hannibal did not care. As devilish as it would be to give the young Prince a taste of voyeurism, he needed the distraction. He was disrobed as Bedelia's supple flesh under his hands was as fiery as the flames engulfing the city. He assaulted the flesh underneath him with nips and caresses, but it was Bedelia who led him to the warmth of her sex.

The pleasure was raw and straight-forward. Bedelia left angry, red streaks down his cool alabaster flesh as his teeth found their place in the flesh of her breast. Their grinding was impatient. Hannibal felt her hand come back to curl into the wisps of his chest hair and he sighed. The tempo they had set could not be maintained for long as their flesh rocked against one another.

It was a short-lived crescendo, however, as neither of them held the stamina in the heat of passion. They laid intertwined with one another as Bedelia caught her breath. Hannibal looked over the couch to find that neither Jack nor Lacroix had disturbed their lovemaking. They laughed together though Bedelia was still breathless.

Hannibal untangled themselves as Bedelia shielded her nudity with her dress. He went to the windowpanes and stared at Baltimore as the flames had started to extinguish. His lover soon joined him at his observation.

"I've been too lax.", Hannibal began, taking Bedelia's hand into his own.

She parted her lips to agree, but he pressed his finger against them. Her eyes lowered.

"But no longer, my queen."

Hannibal left her and the windowpanes. As he walked, he fixed his suit and tucked his stray, silver strands behind his ears. Bedelia only watched but she did not follow. Hannibal looked forward to discussing matters of diplomacy. In fact, he would have a mouthful to say to Lacroix.

As they both have had their fair share of terrorists and opportunists.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the support.

Sunny Side Fried

Chapter Summary

Will Graham returns home. The Anarchs get a surprise. Brian takes on the role as a guardian.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for descriptions of violence. Please continue with caution.

X
“Sunny Side Fried”

Will entered the apartment and crumpled in exhaustion. He smelled repulsive — his clothes stained grey from the sewer sludge. He didn’t have the energy to strip from his clothes as the floor was a welcoming coolness to his body. His ribs still ached as he was sure one of them had started to show from underneath the skin.

He opened his eyes eventually to see the digital clock chirping in the kitchen. It was quarter till three in the morning and eventually, it would be against his very nature to remain awake. Will painfully sat up and held his side. He applied pressure and could feel the sickly pop of his rib going back into place. Being grievously hurt was one thing, but to mend his own rib back into his body was another.

Perhaps there are perks in being a vampire.

With the pain subsiding, he could exhale in relief. Will looked around the apartment to find himself alone. He would’ve thought Brian would be here earlier than him. It mattered little — Brian could take care of himself, or, that’s what Will understood from the older vampire. He seemed indestructible however the fledgling knew it was wishful thinking to believe so.

After all, anyone could be killed including Brian.

The thought left a tart taste on his tongue. The fledgling stood back onto his feet. Will undressed himself and threw his soiled clothes out of the large window facing the street. He went into the bathroom to run the hottest shower he could and stepped in the spray. He had to practically scrub his skin pink to relieve the stench clinging in his pores. He plucked thick

chunks of indescribable gunk out of his curls only to watch it gather in a frothy cloud on top of the drain. Disgusted, Will attempted to get the gunk to flush away to no avail.

From the shower, he heard the front door open and he quickly stepped out the steaming spray. He grabbed a towel off the rack and covered his nudity. He stepped out to see Brian at the kitchen counter with a fresh pack of cigarettes in his hand. The fledgling lit up and met the Brujah with open eyes — catching the older vampire off-guard.

“You’re back!”, Will warmly greeted. “I can’t begin to tell you the events of this night.”

Brian eyed the fledgling’s injuries and raised up his thinly penciled eyebrows. Will stood still as the Brujah began an inspection; lifting Will’s arms and gazing over him with a studious eye. He was fine, truly, except for some aches but they were beginning to heal. However, Brian huffed under his breath and cursed at the bruises flowering up and down Will’s torso.

“What happened to you, kid?”, the Brujah investigated. “Who did this to you?”

Will hesitated. He didn’t know whether Brian would believe him about the Nosferatu in the sewers, or the baby girl he saved, but he couldn’t outright lie to him either. He sucked in his bottom lip and caved in. Brian would’ve known if he lied.

“I had an altercation with a really *nasty* fiend.”, Will admitted, lowering his eyes to the Brujah.

“*Nasty*? What kind of nasty because kid, you smell like absolute shit.”, Brian retorted, crinkling his nose and stepping back from the fledgling.

Will gasped in offense, but he too could smell the lingering musk of the sewer water still on him. He lifted his arm to smell, but the smell wasn’t from there but rather — on top of his head. He grabbed a handful of curls then sniffed his hand. He gagged and looked to the Brujah, by all means, wanted to be nowhere near the fledgling.

“A *nasty*, devilish fiend!”, Will continued, briskly walking away to get back into the bathroom. “With big nasty teeth and claws!”

Brian stood in the doorway as Will disrobed from the towel and stepped back into the shower. The lit cigarette dangling between his lips could not mask the disgusting smell either. The Brujah was puzzled as he tried to use Will’s descriptive imagery as a basis. The fledgling was furiously scrubbing his scalp as more bits of gunk began to plop down into the shower. Brian tapped his fingers against the door frame as he thought.

Big teeth, big claws. It wasn’t a werewolf — they tended to not let their victims live, or at least, without taking appendages with them.

He looked back to the fledgling in the shower and had his ‘eureka!’ moment.

“You mean a *Nosferatu*, kid?”, Brian asked, noticing a few slashes on Will’s back. They were curved, almost scythe-like, but nothing like animal scratches. “In the sewer?”

“Yes! That’s the nasty fiend!”, Will said, peeking his head from the shower curtain. He had a smile twice as big as his face.

Brian scoffed in disbelief as the fledgling continued to shower. He knew the kid had guts, but never once did he really think the kid will go out picking fights. He would have to lecture him about clan relations and such, but for right now he was allowed the fledgling to bask in his victory.

Anarch material, huh?

Brian extinguished his cigarette in the sink and threw the bud in the trashcan. Will stepped out the shower soaking wet, but the smell persisted. Both vampires grew frustrated, but it was Will that went straight into the counter drawers. He rummaged around as Brian looked on. From the drawer, he brandished a pair of gleaming scissors.

He looked to the Brujah with frustrated eyes.

“Scalp me.”, he said, his voice mono toned. “Or so help me I’ll throw myself out the window.”

“Let’s not take it to that extreme, kid.”, Brian jested, taking the pair of scissors from Will. He gestured the fledgling to sit on the counter.

Will did as he was told, but sheepishly covered his manhood. Brian didn’t care — he’s seen his fair share of anatomical bits in his lifetime. Yet, it was boyishly cute to see Will concerned about his modesty. Reminded him much of his younger self, though Brian was a bit of an exhibitionist in later years. He began to cut those chocolatey curls that the Brujah secretly grown to admire. They fell in succession onto the counter and down onto the floor.

Will hummed as some of his curls now landed in his lap. Brian did his best to render the curls short and he groomed the hair left with his free hand. Will turned around to look in the mirror and beamed. He looked older than he did before. The fledgling got off the counter to dust the rest of the curls off him then resorted to admiring himself in the mirror.

Brian chuckled and left the fledgling to fawn in the mirror. He was tired. Matthew and Freddie went back to The Last Call for celebratory drinks and partying, but Brian was simply getting too old to enjoy those things.

Sure, they had done the unthinkable. They stood up to the establishment and made their presence known, but Brian couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. He should’ve dragged Matthew and Freddie with him back to the apartment yet the pair was hedonists at heart and much rather preferred to drink and party in the presence of kine and kindred alike.

They were young and Brian wouldn’t squander their fun. He sat down in the living room to watch the nightly broadcast of their deeds. Eventually, Will came out the bathroom in fresh clothes with his smile still curved across his face. He sat on the sofa’s arm and looked at the television. He made a ‘hmm’ but turned his attention back to feeling the wisps of his softened stubble.

“Did you see any of that?”, Brian pointed to the television.

Will shook his head.

Brian made a ‘huh’ and continued to watch the nightly broadcast while Will went into the kitchen to rummage in the fridge. He came back with two bags of blood and Brian graciously took one. He sat down on the cushion with his legs propped onto the coffee table. The Brujah looked at Will as he sucked the red liquid from the plastic. He looked well, or more so, he looked like he was adjusting. No vampire was truly well as their very affliction was a disease, but Will seemed to be faring well. Brian reached his hand towards Will.

Much to his surprise and elation, Will didn’t shudder or frighten away. He instead, leaned into Brian’s caress and finished his drink. The Brujah felt pleasantly warm as he never once had this closeness with anyone — not even Matthew or Freddie. Will laxed into the caress and his eyelashes began to flutter downwards. Brian continued to watch the nightly broadcast with a swell of comfort in his chest.

The music drowned out Matthew’s dry heaving. He was curled against the toilet in the back whilst Freddie continued to drink herself into a stupor. He had drunk so much liquor he was sure that he would’ve been beyond dead from alcohol poisoning if he was still human. He managed to get back on his feet to stumble out the bathroom.

The Last Call was packed with Anarchs — some local while others came in from neighboring cities. They were ecstatic as Matthew made his way across the vampire watering hole. Most offered their approval while others nagged him for their next plan of action. Newly initiated Anarchs, possibly just embraced by their Anarch sires, seemed even more riled up to cause more havoc. Matthew couldn’t even think straight let alone hear the Anarchs or music around him. He staggered to where Freddie was upturning another shot down her throat.

“H-He-Hey Matthew…”, she slurred, blissfully drunk. She squeezed him tightly and Matthew felt the wind leave him. As lithe as Freddie was, her strength was undeniable.

“Get him ‘nother drink!”

Someone from the crowd was quick to bring her and Matthew a pint of beer and Freddie took hers — downing it in a matter of seconds. Matthew declined as his gut threatened to hurl all over the female Anarch. He stumbled onto the couch as Freddie joined him. Her hair was tied back as her face had blotched just as rouge.

Both of them will feel the hangover the next night, but it was going to be Matthew who would have to take the full front of the Camarilla’s retribution. Sure, Freddie was also an Anarch but the Camarilla had it’s vengeful eyes to Matthew — he was sure of it now. He should be sober, at least, coherent enough to fend off any Camarilla goons that would saunter onto their turf.

Brian would’ve been yelling at the both of them or waterboarding them sober. Matthew cracked a smile at the thought, but his expression soured as he dry heaved on the floor in

front of him. Freddie cringed, but rubbed calming circles into his back. He appreciated her gesture, but they were equally drunk and her ministrations were lazily, painfully slow.

He was sickened, not just from the alcohol, but from the society outside their club. He hated the rich, absolutely loathed them, and wanted nothing more than to eat them alive. He had grown up in a time where humanity killed just to kill. He'd seen the rich send not their sons, but the people's sons into unjust wars only to come back mangled heaps of flesh. He had walked across scorched land and countless buried bodies. He himself had his fair share of funerals as many a childhood friend would leave in green, but only to return home in black.

Once he became a vampire, he thought the inequalities of his human life wouldn't entrap him. He was awfully wrong as the vampire world, or the Camarilla, was immortality at its worst. He hated Hannibal Lecter especially and he'd be damned if he would give the Prince any chance to retaliate. He would strike at him harder, faster, to the point that the Prince could only stand there and take it.

Wishful, rebellious thinking only earned him another gut-wrenching heave and it was then when Matthew had enough of his body betraying him.

He left her on the couch as he tried to stumble to the bar. The bartender eyed him nervously as Matthew braced himself on the counter. The vampires sitting at the counter tried to offer their words of encouragement and expressed their concern, but the Anarch leader would have no ear for it. He needed something to soothe his stomach. He mumbled for his usual and the bartender returned to him with a skinny glass of dark red blood.

To top it off, the bartender added an alka-seltzer, something Matthew had picked up from Brian after the many nights of hangovers. The now carbonated pint of blood went down smooth yet tingly. It seemingly got Matthew moving faster as he could finally see straight. He maneuvered his way through gyrating bodies and towards their personal space but couldn't help but hear a shrill scream over the music. The music was cut short as vampires stood around confused and startled by the scream. Matthew craned his neck around only for his mouth to hang agape.

"Cammies!", the shrill voice yodeled, approaching closer.

It was like a fireball ripping through the crowd as it parted across the dance floor. Matthew only saw a heap of burning, crumbling flesh rushing towards him. He couldn't move — frozen in place as a face plastered with so much pain came hurling towards him.

"Matt! Move your ass!", Freddie screeched at him, trekking across the club with incredible speed.

Freddie grabbed him as the young, engulfed vampire crumpled to the floor. The flesh only burned away to reveal blackened bones. Through all of this, the vampire was still alive as the trauma wasn't enough to trigger the true, final death.

The smell of hot, melting flesh wafted around the club.

Vampires began to panic and flee the club as it was only Freddie and Matthew that held one another as the vampire ceased to exist — the final death leaving only crispy ashes on the floor. A blackened mark etched the floor like an outline. They looked to one another in bewilderment, but it was Matthew who went to examine the ashes. He was now coherent as death wasn't something that even drunk, could be imagined in a stupor. He looked to where Freddie was shell-shocked.

"Freddie.", he called out, hot, angry tears welling at the corners of his eyes. "Look at me."

She looked at him with eyes wide as saucers and filled deep with disbelief. Normally, she was the composed one but not even her could begin to make sense of what just happened in front of them.

He couldn't believe it either, but it was the most revolting thing that'd ever witnessed. He's seen murders, kidnappings, and assaults but never once had he seen a person, or a vampire, lit on fire while alive. It was an image scorched alive into his memory as well as Freddie's.

Bombing their hideout was one thing but sending a vampire molotov into the front door was an entirely different move. Matthew could only kick himself for having The Last Call noticeable — he advertised the place as a refuge for any and all vampires. He shouldn't be surprised that they were snuffed out. However, he wasn't going to back out his promise that The Last Call was a haven for any who needed it.

The Camarilla had always been overwhelming violent towards their would-be enemies, that Matthew knew first-hand, but this wasn't their handiwork. They were old sycophants that argued over city blocks rather than protecting the vampire species. For them to muster any sort of retribution to their actions was laughable.

On the other hand, it wasn't laughable that they had a dead, scorched vampire on their dancefloor.

Matthew could only think of one creature so spiteful and malicious that would enact such violence. The Prince of Baltimore was neither a coward nor a fool, no, he was the worst archnemesis that Matthew had the displeasure of making. The Prince wouldn't stop with one vampire molotov; he'd send an entire squadron if it meant burning down The Last Call. The Anarch had anticipated the Prince to show his true colors. In fact, it excited him to think how else they could unnerve the sophisticated, sound demeanor which Hannibal possessed with fame and renown.

He went to the bar and poured his own drink. He looked back to Freddie, who by all means, gestured for her own drink. Matthew obliged and slid it down the bar counter. She finished it in a single swallow before slamming the glass back down, shattering it in the process. Matthew couldn't blame her — dead vamps tended to kill the buzz.

"So what do we do now?", she huffed, picking out the bits of glass from her palm.

Matthew sucked in his teeth as whiskey burned down his throat. Truly, he had no plan of action. As he had been asked by numerous of would-be-Anarchs-in-the-making earlier in the night, he took things a step at a time rather than planned. In this case, to deal with Hannibal

was to deal with the devil, and Matthew had golden fiddle-playing fingers. They would lay low — though Freddie would disagree wholeheartedly, but Matthew needed time.

Much time.

“Grab a broom.”, Matthew refilled his glass. “We still have a club to run.”

Freddie’s face scrunched up to argue back, but Matthew shot her a look that stopped her mid-sentence. She spun around and stomped away to the storage closet as the few patrons that cowered behind couches and tables had started to appear again. They gathered around Matthew as he finished his drink. He looked to them and scoffed.

“You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay fucking here.”, he uttered into the cup.

A few vampires wasted no time in scurrying out from the nightclub, but only a few remained to join him at the bar counter. The Anarch leader would pay them no mind, but it was comforting to say the least. After all, he was their shining revolutionary leader against the entire world.

Strangolato

Chapter Summary

Chilton reevaluates his position as Hannibal gauges a new enemy. Brian and Will meet with unlikely friends.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings for descriptions of wounds. Please continue with caution.

XI
"Strangolato"

Hannibal sat across the table from his squabbling constituents, constables, and associates. He wasn't bothered, unlike the vampires crowded around his table, as he kept himself composed. His subordinates were startled as the night's events had them on the edge. Like frightened hens, they clucked aimlessly as the fox surrounded the henhouse. They barraged him with a series of demands, concerns, and even the notion that he should *raze* the city. He would do none of that. He sat with his hands crossed in his lap with a politely faux smile. Unlike the rest of them, he kept poise and grace amidst the hellfire.

He had his court meet him in his dining room — something he would never do, even for close friends. He considered his kitchen a *sacrosanct* place, even if he had no need for food, but nonetheless — it was his paradise. The dining room was just as sacred. Every countertop, tile, and light fixture had his own taste involved. Appliances new and practical in their usage remained relatively spotless as he kept them meticulously clean. It was for show, really, but the aesthetics weren't admired with the growing concerns amongst the vampires around his dining table.

He provided refreshments, but only a few vampires partook in drink. The ones who did, however, were all but cautious to sip shallow swallows.

They were hesitant as friends were quickly turning into enemies. As was the way of their politics; to kill or not to kill. Ironic as bold as they were to tell him what he *should* do, they were awfully sheepish at his hospitality. Hannibal respected their concerns but chided their ignorance. If he wanted to dispose of them, he wouldn't need poisoned beverages. Lacroix wasn't as fretful as he partook in drink. His eyes would gravitate from vampire to vampire, but never would they linger on Hannibal.

The Princeling wasn't alone here; he had flown in his own court on a moment's whim. They were still faced, but they held their own reservations behind their curt smiles and chaste complements. Hannibal acknowledged their presence, but it was only Lacroix he had words with. The Prince of Los Angeles didn't have his humbled demeanor, rather, he was misanthropic and passively annoyed in his seat. The blue-violet veins that left streaks up and down his marbled neck flushed deep. His jaw was tensed, and Hannibal could practically hear teeth grinding back in forth.

A Frenchman's pride.

Hannibal was certain that Lacroix was still very much irate from their talk yesternight. He had made it *very* clear that Lacroix was to not ever regain the sarcophagus, or the ship it was still embarked on. Of course, Lacroix was very vocal of his reasonings on why the sarcophagus should be returned to Los Angeles. He dared to imply that Hannibal had no qualms on unlocking the sarcophagus.

The Prince of Baltimore didn't need to open the sarcophagus to know it held something beyond any of their knowledge and preparation. Before doing anything with it, Hannibal wanted as much research invested when the time came to open it – if he decided to open it, it'd be safe.

Truly, Hannibal liked dangling the gilded box in front of the Princeling.

Lacroix was so unnerved to the fact that the elder Prince held it, much more so as he tried to explain the significance of the sarcophagus, but that only steeled Hannibal's reasonings on keeping it *away* from Lacroix. Once again, Lacroix criticized Hannibal's lack of ambition to reveal what the sarcophagus held inside.

Hannibal heard none of it and dismissed Lacroix with a singular threat — should the younger Prince attempt to cause any disharmony because of the sarcophagus in Baltimore, it would be Hannibal who would rip his throat open. The Frenchman reluctantly accepted the terms of the agreement, but, Hannibal was waiting feverishly for the Prince of Los Angeles to retaliate.

However, the Frenchman hadn't broken their mutual silence since joining the rest of the vampires at the table. Nor did his court attempt to speak on their Prince's behalf. He truly posed no threat to Hannibal as Baltimore was rightfully his. Sebastian was merely a child with misguided anger because he didn't want to share his toys.

Hannibal listened to the vampires seated around him for a few moments longer before dismissing them for the night.

He needed time to recuperate. The vampires and Lacroix gave their respects and left Hannibal seated at the table. Jack led them out. He had a moment of silence and it was refreshing to not have to hear a dozen voices nagging at him.

He had done very well in sending Matthew a *clear* message. After a night's slumber, he had gathered his thoughts. Rather than disturbed, he was entertained. The Anarchs hadn't caused him much grief other than the few protests or outbursts from their young leader, but yesternight was a prime example of Hannibal being too lenient. He shouldn't have let the

Anarchs settle so comfortably within the city, but as his predecessor cautioned him patience — Hannibal loathed the Anarch menace. The Camarilla was skeptical to pursue action, but it was the Camarilla who had to *answer* to Hannibal.

After all, it was their mistakes decades prior that fostered the beginnings of the Anarchs. Hannibal was offering a solution to their problem; *extermination*. The sooner they were rid of the Anarchs *everywhere*, the sooner they could go back to their business as usual.

Matthew was young, ignorant, and frankly Hannibal couldn't stand his guts. He was the loudest of the Anarchs, but he was the most prideful of any vampire Hannibal had met. In fact, Matthew's ego was more inflated than his own. It came with age, the Prince would assume, yet Matthew never seemed to have grown out of his tantrum days.

To make their rivalry more exciting, he was going to give Matthew and his Anarchs a fair chance at striking back. They weren't going to lick their wounds and bow their heads. He knew better of them to suspect otherwise. The Prince enjoyed a good fight and the Anarch leader wasn't the kind of vampire who'd run with his tail between his legs.

Hannibal would be here, in his shining tower, waiting for the night Matthew would come with his fangs bared and a stake aimed for his heart. Until then, he would return to his regal duties and perform his statecraft.

Business as usual.

"Rise and shine, sunshine.", was the first thing Will heard as his eyes were just starting to open.

He had fallen asleep unceremoniously strewn across the couch with a puddle of drool underneath him. The television had been muted, but the nightly news report was alive and well. Above him, Brian had a cigarette drooping from his lips. The ash had begun to curl and before it could land on Will. He got up to swat the Brujah away. He was *aching*, to say the least, and he wanted nothing more but to sleep for a few more hours.

Brian was wide-eyed and very much awake as he was dressed from head-to-toe in a leather ensemble Will wouldn't want to be caught dead in. The Brujah urged Will to get up and the fledgling did — walking to the bathroom to clean off his face. The quick splash of cool water on his face didn't wake him up as he hoped. He changed out of his clothes and met Brian at the front door.

"Where are we going now?", Will questioned, his tone still heavy of sleep. "I want to sleep with the worms."

"The night's young, kid.", Brian let the fledgling walk ahead of him out the apartment. "Let's walk."

They walked out of the apartment into the cool night. The streets were seemingly empty save for a few denizens loitering at the corner. Will shoved his hands in his pockets as Brian lead the way. He would've preferred to hail a cab than having to walk especially as his body was

still aching from last night. Yet, Brian had promised that his old friend wasn't far from where they are. Will was skeptical, but nonetheless he followed Brian's march down the blocks.

After an hour or so, both vampires stood in front of a large, run-down building with a brightly painted red metal door. Will's legs burned in exertion. There were people waiting outside, but they weren't *kine*. They were vampires just like Brian and Will, but Will had never seen so many in one gathering. He hadn't thought vampires met like this. He was under the assumption that they kept each other apart, but the crowd showed otherwise.

The vampires eyed them but went back to their conversations. Brian gestured for the fledgling to come closer. Will grimaced but stood dutifully next to Brian in front of the red metal door.

The slot of the door was slid to the side and a pair of jaded eyes glared at them. Will could feel the heavy, thumping music coming from behind the door as Brian began to unroll his sleeve. He showed a darkly inked tattoo Will only caught a glimpse of to the red door's eyes. The door was opened, and the eyes disappeared.

Brian walked into the establishment with Will close on his heels. Inside, the music was electric as the lights above them flickered in a miasma of blues and pinks. The entire scene was lively and patrons of all sorts; kine and kindred alike, danced and grooved with one another. They slinked their way through the dancing crowd, but it was Brian who seemed to be the most at place between them both. The fledgling was never a fan of social settings; clubs, to be exact. It was suffocating and a sensory overload, much more so, especially now as Will was a vampire. He heard laughter, crying, the occasional moan swirl around his drain of a headspace.

They made it to the bar counter, standing in between passed-out partygoers slumped over the counter, and the bartender acknowledged their presence.

"Long time no see, *Anarch*.", the bartender greeted Brian, shaking hands with him across the counter.

The Brujah cheekily smiled at the bartender who was referred to as "Lou" and sat at an empty barstool. He was a huskier man with a balding head of hair. His shirt was greased from slinging drinks all night, but his hands were immaculately kept. Several thinly-inked tattoos were etched up and down his neck. Brian was familiar with the bartender as he and Lou chatted.

Will awkwardly stood at the counter, but his eyes were transfixed at the dancefloor. He had never seen so many people in one crowded place, let alone dancing in a crowded place, and it was distracting. He cared little to none of what Brian and the bartender talked about as the music drowned out their conversation. Neither could he focus on their lips moving. However, he found focus at a pair of azure eyes finding him through the midst of gyrating bodies. He swallowed and blinked. The eyes disappeared.

"Kid, sit down.", Brian chastised, pointing to a now-empty bar stool. "You're making me nervous."

Will sat down. He'd scan the dancefloor behind him but to no avail, the eyes were gone.

The bartender slid Brian a drink and offered Will his own, but the fledgling declined. He wasn't interested in drink, but he searched the crowd to find those eyes that found him. Brian shrugged his shoulders and downed the drink.

"Are the *twins* in, Lou?", Brian practically had to shout because of the increasing vibrato of the music around them.

The bartender nodded.

"Let them know I'm here.", Brian got up. Will watched him but didn't pursue.

The Anarch disappeared across the nightclub. The bartender brought a tall glass of blood to the fledgling and he finally accepted it; sipping from the straw. It was far sweeter than what they had at home and Will greedily sucked half the glass before the bartender readied another. As he turned his back to the dancefloor to watch the crowd, a hand curled around his shoulder.

He bristled and snapped his neck around to see the hauntingly blue eyes much closer and a part of a face. The stranger's hand left his shoulder and came to cusp his chin. Will swallowed as he felt warmness heat up his face.

"Aren't you a beautiful creature?", the voice was pleasant, much louder to his ears compared to the club's music.

His lips parted open to speak, but a finger was pressed against them.

"Don't speak, my *beau*.", the stranger brought Will to his feet. "Come dance with me."

Will's legs moved to the accordance of the stranger leading him towards the dancefloor. Dainty arms circled his waist as his own arms seemed to find a slim waist. They were close to one another as the dancefloor around them molded around them. He wasn't much of a dancer and he had clumsy feet, yet he kept up with the stranger waltzing with him.

"You are more handsome than anyone I've ever seen.", the stranger commented, her hands cusping Will's face.

He could feel his face heat up at the compliment. He was sure he looked like an absolute fool, but the feeling evaporated when those cold hands brought warmth to his flesh. Their bodies pressed closer together as the dance picked up in tempo. Under the heavy lights, Will only made out her eyes and her lips, but she was a pale as alabaster. Her hair, now a deep blue tint, was just as curly as his had been.

In a horrifyingly twisted way, she looked much like him.

The curve of the stranger's body against his own, the breathy exhale ticking the shell of his ear, and the familiar warmth was exhilarating. Will caught himself buried deeply into the crook of a feminine neck with his fangs nearing flesh. As he was tempted to bite down, the sudden grasp at his waist was gone and he was left with open arms. Around him, the dancing

continued in a frenzied crescendo, but it was Will who was out of place. Confused more than embarrassed, Will shimmied out from the dancefloor and back to the bar.

Lou had a third drink waiting for the fledgling as Will buried his face into the crook of his shoulder. The bartender said not a word, but his raised eyebrow was more telling. He must've seen Will embarrass himself, yet he didn't mention it as he slid the drink down the counter. Will's face was hot and his stomach was queasy. Unless he was losing more of his frazzled mind, he was hallucinating. Yet, he could feel those lips ghost up his flesh and leave him bothered and warm. It was too literal not to be real. Will looked behind him to find Brian entertaining a young woman across the club. He could see the Brujah smile and charm the woman into his arms before the glimmer of fangs pricked the flesh of her neck.

At least one of them was having a good time.

He looked back to Lou and eyed the red liquid.

"Do you have anything stronger?", the fledgling asked Lou, eyeing the various shelves of top-shelf liquor behind the bartender.

Lou set aside his wet towel and beamed a fang at Will. He reached underneath the bar, rather, and sat down a clear decanter. He uncorked it and topped Will's drink with a strong-smelling drink. Will downed the glass and felt the familiar string of pure, white vodka burn down his throat. He grimaced as the drink went down and Lou filled his glass again. The bartender repeated topping off Will's drink until the fledgling ushered for him to stop by sliding his glass away.

He rather be drunk hallucinating than completely sober and losing his mind.

The bandages smelled rancid as they were stained a gross mixture of red and green. Dr. Chilton changed his own bandages, much to his nurses' relief, and beyond his repulse. It was just as nauseating as the sight. They fell to the floor like rotted vines. Underneath the soiled bandages, his wounds were partially healed.

He had a few bumps here and there, but his right eye was lazily drooping lower on his face while his jaw didn't sit quite right. Most of his teeth had to be removed, saved for his molars, but he replaced his gnarly smile with veneers. His nose had a noticeable hunch to it. When he breathed, his exhale was a nasally growl. His hearing had taken considerable, irreversible damage and blotches remained in his good eye.

Mirrors had begun to disgust him and he had all of them removed from his house. He avoided reflections as much to his ability, but whether it was a glass or the bathtub full of water — they always haunted him, inciting his antipathy. He was insecure over his appearance, a foreign feeling, as Dr. Chilton never thought of himself as grotesque or plain-looking. Once upon a time, he thought of himself as fiercely handsome, proudly as his high cheekbones, stone-like features, and suaveness earned him adornment and praise. His appearance now was short of monstrous.

Downstairs, the cleaners still had their work cut out for them; blood wasn't as easy as cleaning spilled milk. He already commissioned for the upstairs flooring to be replaced given his housemaid had been slain and her blood stained the wood paneling dark rogue. Initially, he tried to scrub the blood up himself, but the effort proved to be in vain as the floor was a lost cause. The cleaners themselves were unable to lift the blood from the floorboards and inevitably, Dr. Chilton replaced the flooring. Chilton felt a prang of loss when he thought of his former maid — even going to the extent of covering her funeral expenses. He wasn't as civil with her as an employer should have been but he wasn't a monster either. What he lacked in amiability, he made up for it in humility.

As he attempted to get back to business, Chilton couldn't function like he used to. He had isolated himself from his closest acquaintances as he couldn't brave to see them in broad daylight. Or did he allow his attentive nurses to linger too long in his presence. He resorted to independent tasks such as emails and phone conferences to save face and the beratement from his would-be enemies and friends alike. It was for the best as Chilton couldn't stomach himself, let alone others could keep polite in his presence.

Dr. Chilton was not in the mood to be gawked at like lowly freak of nature.

Yet, that was what he was — *a freak of nature*. He had prolonged his natural life beyond the boundaries of mortality. Whereas his colleagues would age and die, he was saved the inevitable end. In reality, death would've been a merciful end to his story as his deformities could not have be mended as long as Hannibal kept his *vitae* from Dr. Chilton's lips. He knew he wouldn't have been granted the privilege, not now, and especially not any time soon. The Prince was rightfully upset with him and Chilton would be too if he was in Hannibal's shoes. In some twisted, cynical way Dr. Chilton believed he deserved his fate.

He lied, berated, and schemed his way through friends and family alike. He did not bat an eyelash at the worst of atrocities as at the highest point of his apathy, he was unfearful of the bridges he had burned. He didn't hesitate to throw his friends into the hellfire if it meant he would bask in heat of their ashes. Hannibal strung him that way; to be apathetic, unfeeling, and desolate to anything that didn't revolve around the Prince himself.

Dr. Chilton had propitiated dangerous gifts for Hannibal; in particular, the kind that breathed and screamed if you stabbed them. He coerced the most at risk for promises of wealth and stability only to sell their flesh to the cruelest of clients. He was a willing participate to any and all crimes his clients committed. He traded secrets and sabotaged hapless victims. All of what he's ever done had led to this moment.

Because Chilton couldn't accept his mortality.

Truly, Dr. Chilton did not want to die. He hated funerals, the preparations for said funerals, and the god awfulness of comforting mourning people. He didn't want to imagine himself in the earth with maggots stripping his flesh from bone. However, death was inevitable as his body would age and sicken. For he was mortal bound to the mortal earth.

Yet, the Prince had never aged or sprouted a wrinkle. He was as beautiful as the first night Dr. Chilton met him. Before Hannibal, Dr. Chilton thought of vampires as superstitions, not walking, talking, facades of human beings among him. Hannibal wasn't just a vampire – he

was beyond the very definition. Chilton envied that, no, he lusted after Hannibal and what he embodied. But what he was gifted was far from it, rather, he was enthralled into servitude. He knew it was morally wrong to entangle himself with the likes of the Prince, but he was addicted to the boons that came with having him as a regent.

The first taste of Hannibal's blood left Chilton recoiling. His own blood chilled and stilled in his veins as Hannibal's left a stinging coldness from the grave. Everything that happened afterwards was amplified as scents that used to be subtle were now as clear as ever. His vision was perfectly attuned regardless of the conditions and there was vitality coursing through his aged body. Whereas he was inhibited by mortal physicality, Hannibal's blood granted him prowess surpassing the constraints. He could run hours on end without a single exhale and perversely *fuck* even thrice as long.

It was one of the best feelings in the world, Chilton could admit.

Chilton vividly remembered groveling at Hannibal's feet at the first taste — earning the infamous smirk the Prince always had whenever he won someone over. He was the Prince's *ghoul* – a lapdog to whistle to or kick at a moment's whim. Later, he was began to love his metaphorical chains as the blood kept him docile.

In hindsight, Chilton was foolish to allow the Prince to string him along for so long. The blood, however, drew him back every time he considered severing the ties they shared. Dr. Chilton couldn't imagine himself *without* the blood, but he was desperately anxious to alleviate from Hannibal's enslavement. As his wounds leaked pus and gore, it was for certain that Dr. Chilton needed Hannibal much longer than he would've liked. He could only continue to serve his regent to the best of his ability as he, like all citizens in Baltimore, owed Hannibal much more than just their gratitude.

But their lives.

Carmen

Chapter Summary

Brian and Will meet the Baron of Baltimore. Will gets into a fight of his life.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for descriptions of violence. Please continue with caution.

XII
“Carmen”

Brian had dragged Will into the elevator with him. The fledgling, much to his protest, demanded to be left at the bar. The Brujah was going to have none of it as they were here for business, not pleasure. The elevator ascended for brief moments and the doors parted. Ahead of them was an elongated hallway with a single door at the end of it.

“Before we go see this friend of mine — she may be a *Toreador* but she’ll rip you to pieces like a *Gangrel*.”, Brian warned as he side-eyed Will.

“You won’t let her eat me alive, would you?”, Will asked, not in the slightest threatened by Brian’s warning.

A smirk twitched Brian’s lips upwards.

“Just a bite, I promise.”

They walked down the elongated hallway decorated in rouge and gold. Both sides were bordered with vases, sculptures, and flora of exotic origins. The smell of roses wafted in the air and it was alluring. Will felt hypnotized by the aroma but it began to bother him the closer they got to a tall, dark door.

Brian knocked on the door and took a step back. Will idly stood by while he was looking at the décor on the walls. The paintings were erotic, if not romantic, and Will dared to call it pornography. However, he gravitated towards one and his fingers sheepishly reached out to touch it. The subject of the painting was of two women; one older the other younger as they restrained a man in the process of being beheaded. Perversely violent, Will could hear the blood gushing and blade sawing from behind the canvas. He was stopped by the door

opening. A woman stood in the doorway dressed in a white sheer robe and a crown of light curls caressing her shoulders. She examined the two vampires in front of her before smiling and stepping aside.

“Come on, kid.”, Brian scolded, pulling the fledgling away from the painting.

They were in a living room thrice the size anything Will had ever been in. The ceilings expanded further upward than the club space downstairs. The furniture was modern and meticulously curated to fit the environment. The kitchen was of a modest size, yet it was the bar that made up for it. Up above them was a loft area with several doors, assuming each to be another room, and what looked to be a balcony looking over the cityscape. As antsy as Will was, he felt as if he was dwarfed in such a large space.

The woman gestured for them to have a seat and Will sat closely to Brian. The Brujah kicked his feet onto the coffee table and dug out his cigarettes. The fledgling wanted to chastise Brian, but he kept his eyes towards the woman as she practically floated around the apartment. She had gone to the bar to pour them drinks and Brian began to speak to her in a language Will still hadn’t learn. It was a slight comfort to know she was also a vampire, but Will knew nothing of this woman other than she had familiarity with the Brujah. Brian seemed to like her as their conversation kept an airy tune to it. His body posture wasn’t guarded, but rather relaxed. They chattered and three glasses was sat down on the coffee table. She looked at Will with gold eyes and the fledgling lowered his eyes.

“You must be Will Graham.”, her voice was velvety-smooth. “The whole town’s talking about you.”

Will reached for the drink as the woman was dangerously close in his personal space. He was already buzzed but, he needed to be stupidly drunk to tolerate this any further. She smelled of vanilla. Every inch of her was sparkling bronze as tight curls was tied up high. Her supple flesh cupped inside her robe hung dangerously between the fabric as Will averted his gaze.

Brian exhaled his cigarette and took his feet off the coffee table. His eyes sternly focused on Will, by who all means, took the glare with a grain of salt. He didn’t like to be known, especially by complete strangers, and he didn’t owe the woman anything. However, he gave in as Brian kept his glare.

“Yes.”, Will answered flatly. “I am Will Graham.”

“The lone *childe* of Baltimore. How awful of your sire to be so selfish…It can’t be helped, huh?”

Will swallowed and dug his fingers into the glass. Respectfully, he would’ve liked the woman to *not* mention his sire’s untimely demise as he himself was still processing the events of that night. He hadn’t thought to feel anything towards the situation but for his lack of a sire to be pitied against him was a low blow.

“*Bella*, don’t joke about that.”, Brian intervened, seeing how Will was offended. “He’s been through enough already.”

“Don’t mind your Brujah friend. I meant no harm, of course. I’m very charmed to meet you, Will.”, the woman sat next to Brian, her long legs stretching across the man’s lap. “I’m Bella.”

Beautiful.

Will nodded and put his drink back down on the coffee table. He looked over to where Bella and Brian sat together, seemingly wrapped around each other, and he took mental note of it. The Brujah whispered something to Bella and she responded by lifting her glass to her lips. The unspoken words in the air left Will speculating the depth of their relationship.

“It’s not often you visit me, Brian.”, Bella cusped Brian’s face to bring him in closer. The Brujah had a smile from ear to ear.

“Conflicting politics, y’know?”, Brian suggested. “And you aren’t easy to gain an audience with, *Baroness*.”

Baroness.

Will wouldn’t have ever known the woman curled against his friend was a politician. He was used to seeing twisted faces and suits not full lips and seductive eyes. He kept his focus towards Bella but the beginnings of whispers began to tease the shell of his ear. He tightened his hands in his lap.

Something about her rubbed him the wrong way – but the Brujah was ignorant not to see it either. She was hedonistic and shallow and brash. Underneath her sculpted body, Will saw how much of a shell she was. Whether or not she was a friend, Will couldn’t say but he couldn’t shake the feeling of mistrust.

“Not everyone likes to break their toys, *Anarch*.”, Bella’s responded coldly. “Some of us like to *share*.”

Blunt.

Though the response wasn’t directed towards the fledgling, he felt the sting of the vampiress’ words.

She unwrapped herself from Brian’s embrace and began to tie her sheer robe together. The Brujah grimaced and sat forward on the couch. He shot a glance to Will, by who all means, was not surprised Brian’s mouth got him in trouble. Bella stood at the bar counter with her nails tapping against the marble countertop. She eyed Brian with steel eyes, but she looked to the fledgling with a glint of curiosity.

“However,”, she trailed off, a smile etching across her face. “Since you were so polite upon your entrance, I’ll let you petition me.”

Formal.

Vampire society at least kept its manners — Bella seemed very much eager to throw the both of them out. Brian laxed in relief as the baroness approached. Though she was hardly clothed,

her posture forced attention. As beautiful as her name implied, the power she kept tightly wound in her polite smile was ugly underneath. Will could see it seep off her like ocean waves battering rocks.

Brian cleared his throat and rose up from the couch. Will watched in idle silence but was keenly aware that even the Brujah was gauging himself.

“I’m not asking for myself.”, Brian began. “I’m asking this for Will.”

The fledgling was surprised. The Baroness was more surprised as her eyebrows lifted ever so slightly, and a gasp escaped from her painted lips. She composed herself and waited for Brian’s request.

“We are in some deep shit, Baroness. If the time ever comes where I can’t *protect* him…”, the Brujah lowered his head and Will could hear a chuckle stifled underneath his breath.

“He’ll be protected.”, Bella agreed. “As you have been a friend to me for many years, it’ll be only right if I protect *your* friend.”

Will wasn’t sure to be relieved or skeptical. He knew that Brian was no friend of Hannibal Lecter or anyone associated with him, but to suggest that Will would need protecting in the near future left a prang of anxiety curling in his stomach. He knew nothing of this woman or her affiliation, but Brian trusted her. He wanted nothing more but to reassure the Brujah that he wouldn’t need the Baroness’s protection, or anyone’s, but the Brujah could no longer keep his jagged composure. The fledgling only saw a glimpse of what a bloodied tear was before it was wiped away.

He’s serious. Will rose up from his seat. Bella turned away from them both to go towards the glass staircase across the space. Brian huffed and pulled a cigarette from his pocket.

“But you’ll have to do something for *me*.”, she whipped her head around with a stern, slightly concerning frown on her face.

Brian ignited his cigarette as Will soured. He already knew he wasn’t going to like what she was going to ask, but Brian was listening. After all, they seemed to be involved with one another beyond favors and courtesies.

“You know me and my *twin* sister don’t get along.”

“Tell me about it.”, Brian quipped, watching how the glint in Bella’s eyes had darkened. “There isn’t a night where you aren’t yelling at each other.”

“Speaking of which…”

“She’s gone for the night.”, Bella had started to descend from the staircase. “For her *own* good.”

The Brujah hid his surprise behind a cloud of exhaled smoke.

“Let me guess, she brought home *another* lover boy.”

Bella scoffed. This hadn't been the first time her twin sister had a lustful lover in their shared loft, or would it be the last, but how Bella reacted meant the newest lover wasn't in good graces with the Baroness. The way her lips twitched and how her eyes became jaded, it was very clear she had malice intent towards the lover, not that Will or Brian cared. Rather, they were audience to the Baroness's wrath.

"He's the absolute *worst* kind of vampire I've ever met!", Bella was back on the couch with her legs kicked up onto the coffee table. Her head was craned over the back of the couch as she could only seethe. She flexed her toes and curled them inward. Will saw how her hands tightened with the sheer stress of balling them up. Her eyebrows had begun to furrow so tightly that ripples began to crease in between them.

As witnesses, Brian and Will kept a neutral expression on their faces as Bella seemed to be out for blood. Understandable, to a degree, as it seems that there was nothing but bitterness between her and her sister. Will couldn't comment because he just met Bella, but Brian appeared to be adjusted to her temperament.

She pointed towards her kitchen and Brian dutifully went to it. He opened the fridge and brought out an elongated pitcher filled with red liquid. He came back to top off her glass. Will didn't whip him out to be a serving boy. Or a gentleman. The corners of his lips turned upwards and Brian shot another menacing glare.

Don't worry, I won't tell your secret. Will would joke about this later.

"A *Nosferatu*, no less! She might as well fornicate with the *kine*."

"Didn't cut you out to be prejudiced, Baroness.", Brian's cigarette had begun to curl inwards. He flicked the ash into his cup. "Does this *Nosferatu* have a name?"

The Baroness scoffed and crossed her arms.

"His name is Tung. Bertram Tung. The sniveling little rat weaseled himself all the way from Los Angeles."

"And into your sister's bed. Oh, how the tables have turned, Baroness.", the Brujah's tongue was sharp in his rebuttals. Its borderline mocking and there was a pause between Brian and the Baroness. She didn't react.

Will refilled his own glass and continued to listen.

"The point is I want him *out* from between my sister's legs and *out* of my hair."

"—Baroness.", Will interrupted, setting his glass back down. "You're not asking us to *kill* him, right?"

The Brujah caught his cigarette smoke in his mouth as he was about to scold Will for speaking. Yet, the Baroness seemed to be elated when the fledgling spoke, almost expecting. She curled her legs underneath her as Will was sitting on pins and needles. The Baroness was

hard to read and Will couldn't gauge her next reaction. She looked Will up and down, seemingly interested, but reverted to cynicism.

"Of course not, sweet thing.", she cooed, practically mewling at Will. "Just drag my strumpet of a sister back home with her lover boy too."

Cruel. The Baroness was a sweet, nectar-bearing blossom but her nectar was nothing but sweet. She was sourly bitter with prejudice that not Will could fathom having towards anyone.

Except the Prince.

He looked down into his lap and Brian finished his cigarette.

"Alright, you got us. Where does she haunt?", the Brujah asked.

"Anywhere there's a party — her words, not mine.", the Baroness said with emphasis on *party*.

"Anywhere in particular…?", Will saw a slight change in Brian's face as the Brujah looked rightfully irritated. Baltimore was a large city with many parties, some high-up while others underground and lucrative, and to not repeat the other night — they needed more insight to where the sister Baroness frequented. Surely not downstairs as the Baroness wouldn't have needed their help.

"Try the diner a few blocks from here. It's her post-blackout haunt. Tung, on the other hand, is a sewer rat so I hope you brought your rain boots.", the Baroness quipped.

Great. Will didn't want to go anywhere near a sewer ever again.

"Happy hunting.", with that, the Baroness stood up.

The Baroness abandoned the couch back to the staircase. She shot a glance at Will who was attentive to her undesirable musings of her sister's lover. Her lips thinned and she tooted her nose upwards. She would not further speak more of the Nosferatu or of her sister — the topic soured her mood further. However, Will was curious to why her of all people would care about their sister's business. After all, she was *the* Baroness.

"The both of you may stay the night, but please — don't start to live here.", Bella warned, especially to Brian, as it was implied that the Brujah had shared many of his nights here previously.

"Thank you.", Will said as Bella began to disappear up the staircase.

The Brujah shoved his hands into his jean pockets and walked towards the front door. Will turned to follow but the older vampire cut him short. The fledgling raised an eyebrow.

"Stay here.", the Brujah commanded. "I have a few errands to run."

"Don't leave me with her.", Will began. "I don't trust her."

The Brujah laughed and finished his cigarette by extinguishing it in a nearby aquarium. Will wasn't laughing, no, he was dead serious. He had no trust for Bella or her intentions and he'd be damned if he was going to stay in her domain. The fish frantically swarmed the cigarette but averted when the ash had begun to taint their watery sanctuary.

"This isn't a divine comedy, Brian.", Will protested. "Do not leave me here with this sycophant."

"Lower your voice.", the Brujah warned. "Look, she's still somewhat of a friend and at least here you won't have to worry about getting your ass staked."

Will wasn't a child, in the terms of physicality, and wasn't going to be abandoned on a whim. Secondly, he wasn't comfortable staying with the Baroness as she already left the impression, she was neither a friend or foe. Rather, a vampire whose intentions were as opaque as her personality. They already had this discussion before; Will was not going to be left behind.

"I'll come back in a few hours.", the Brujah was already at the door. "I'll always be by your side."

"Now and forever."

The Brujah meant it, truly meant it, but Will still hadn't forgiven Brian for leaving him the previous time. Yet, he could not be mad at the Brujah as he hadn't broken the promise. He didn't pursue Brian as he left the living space, but he did watch the Brujah get into the elevator. Their eyes watched one another down the long corridor as the elevator doors shut. Will closed the door and went back to sit on the sofa. He hid his face in his hands as tinges of waning warmth flushed his cheeks.

He wasn't going to cry, but hot tears welled at the corners of his eyes as he sat there. He'd never been like this about anyone, let alone himself, and it was disheartening to be alone again. Loneliness was a cruel punishment and Will was the prisoner.

However, he felt fingers tap along his shoulders and he raised up. Behind him, the familiar woman was leaning over the couch with her lips parted and her eyes lidded downwards at the fledgling. Will's heart skipped a beat, figuratively, as he couldn't contain his inner excitement at the woman's return.

"Did you miss me?", she cooed, bringing her fingers to the tears that had fell from Will's eyes. "Sweet *beau* of mine?"

Will wetted his lips and parted them to respond, but they were sealed with a kiss. She tasted of vanilla and blood. Their kiss became ravenous as the woman was nearly over the couch with the vigor of their embrace. Will broke them apart as there was a plethora of new whispers urging him to stay away. He ignored all of them.

"Please, tell me your name.", he hadn't thought before to ask of her name as she appeared as quickly as she left.

The woman laughed and walked around the couch. Will caught glimpses of her heightened skirt teasing the supple flesh of her lower half. He was not a baser man, but he was still encased in mortal flesh. Her body was molded of velvety skin and refined by the finest of artists. Her brown hair fell like coiled ringlets to her breasts as her eyes, now fully visible in the light of the room, glittered azure with tinges of goldenrod outlining them.

“Alana.”, the name was sweeter than any beignet Will had ever eaten. He noted the name into his memory. “Alana Bloom.”

“Has my sister lied on me yet?”

Sister.

They looked nothing alike; physically. Alana was crafted of alabaster whilst the Baroness was tinted with jasper. Bella was mature, fully-figured as Alana was petite yet curvaceous downwards. Will was unsure at the family resemblance, regardless, he was absolutely smitten with Alana.

“No…”, Will trailed off. “…I don’t know of any lies.”

“Liar.”, Alana accused, snaking her hands up her own thighs. “I should set your pants on fire.”

She was upon him with roving hands exploring his flesh like a blank canvas. Her lips parted to lay soft kisses up and down his neck. He could feel the prick of her fangs dipping into his flesh and he sighed. However, the fangs dug deeper, and Will couldn’t help but recoil from the suddenness. Alana, however, was gleefully entertained at his reaction as a trail of red blemished her lips. Will swallowed and held his hand onto where he had been punctured. He didn’t know whether to be aroused or frightened. Alana wiped the blood from her lips with the pad of her finger as her other hand traveled to unbutton her shirt.

“The flesh is sinful.”, a voice scolded him. “The fruit rottens.”

Will was rightfully frightened as he wasn’t prepared for what was happening. Sure, he had relations with women before, but it was happening faster than what he would’ve liked. Alana was devious in her disrobing as it was ever apparent she was bond to have relations, yet, Will couldn’t help but feel himself wanting out. He kindly eased her off him and stood up. He fixed the collar of his shirt to hide the puncture mark. Alana sat back on the couch with her perfectly plucked eyebrows raised.

“I’m sorry, but I cant…”, he rambled, his mind racing to dozens different excuses he could use. “I really have to go.”

She smiled, but her eyes feigned her desire. She began to button up her shirt again as her gold-flecked eyes didn’t leave Will for a single moment. He felt incredibly hot, burning actually, and he needed to get outside as fast he could. The front door couldn’t open fast enough as Will paced down the hallway. He whipped his head behind him, but he was alone in the hallway as the elevator pinged nearby. He got inside the elevator and didn’t relax until it was descending.

He didn't acknowledge Lou at the bar or any of the patrons still gyrating on the dancefloor. He didn't want to — he had enough of it.

He was back outside and onto the cracked asphalt with traffic blaring in front of him. Relieved he was out of the heated situation, Will waited for the traffic to clear before he crossed the street. He walked briskly with his hands shoved his pockets and his head down. He couldn't explain the sudden panic that aroused from Alana, but it was suffocating. Brian would be irritated that he didn't listen, but Will would be damned to stay any longer. He walked into a nearby parking lot of a gas station and went inside.

The dollar bills still rolled tightly in his pocket bulged out as he looked around the gas station. The cashier was focused into a magazine as he didn't acknowledge Will's entrance. It was for the better because Will didn't have the patience to make conversation. He didn't have the need to eat or drink, but he needed a distraction. He picked up several bags of snacks, then a liter of soda, and finally a pack of gum. He made his way to the counter as the door chimed.

From his right, two men walked in with their eyes sizing up Will. They were tattooed, much like Brian, and underneath their clothes Will could make out the stencil of their firearms. He couldn't hear their heartbeats as they passed, but he smelled the familiar stench of the grave wafted from them underneath alcohol and cigarette smoke. He kept his gaze towards them as he sat his snacks down onto the counter.

They aren't human. Will crinkled his nose as the smell lingered in the air, but unlike himself, the cashier seemed not to be bothered by the overpowering stench of the grave.

The cashier wretched his attention from his magazines and began to ring up his items. He had asked Will how his night was going and the fledgling answered plainly.

"Yeah, my night's been shit.", the cashier started. "Boss left me with the graveyard shift."

"Only graveyard I see is with dancing ghouls.", Will replied, earning a puzzled look from the cashier in front of him.

The two men went towards the freezers and the cashier asked if Will wanted a bag. The fledgling nodded and nearby, another door opened as a woman came out shaking water off her hands. She was rightfully surprised as the two men were mere steps from her. Will heard her apologize as she tried to walk towards the counter, but one of the men grabbed her by the crook of her arm. That earned a shrill 'no!' from the woman as she was spun around to face the man who held her in a vice grip.

The cashier rose in protest, but both him and Will was met by the steeled eye of a pistol brandished their way. He ducked behind the counter as Will sat his bagged goods down on the floor.

"You stay the fuck back, *fledgling*.", the man with the gun warned, his piss-yellow eyes gleaming sharply at him.

His intuition was right; they were vampires. They knew of him which meant his existence was known beyond the trial. Every fiber in his being told him to ignore the scene behind him, but the woman started to practically beg Will for help. He chuckled underneath his breath as he could punch himself for being apathetic.

The cashier peeked out from under the counter and watched as Will approached the two vampires harassing the woman. The one brandishing the gun tauntingly held his finger on the trigger, but Will welcomed the gesture. If he was going to die this evening, let it be in a blaze of glory. Whether it was the blood-alcohol giving him courageous ignorance, he didn't care as the gun was unrelentless in it's stance.

The other vampire saw Will coming and shoved the woman away from him. She landed haphazardly on top of stacked boxes and Will could hear the sickening *crunch* of a bone breaking. He tensed as the gun was thrown aside and he was met with a punch thrown to his face. Will dodged it as another punch was already flown his way — connecting to his cheek.

He was knocked back into the nearby aisle with merchandise softening the impact, but he was pounced upon by his attacker. They wrestled on the floor as Will had caught a glance of the second assailant going for his own gun. He threw his head forward and made a sickening '*thunk*' with the vampire above him; the pair reeling from impact. Will quickly forced himself to roll over as a bullet rang out in the gas station. However, he was unharmed as the bullet had made its home into the flesh of the first attacker. He howled in pain as his companion didn't hesitate to unload more of the bullets towards their way.

It took every ounce of willpower to force his body to duck and dive underneath aisles and racks as the bullets were like torpedoes honed on his location. Will counted five additional shots before they stopped. He kept himself ducked behind another aisle as the other two vampires argued furiously with one another. The aroma of blood wafted in the air as well as the metallic fragrance of fresh bullets. Both the cashier and the woman were cowered under the counter and Will let out a breathy laugh. He was beginning to think it would've been better if he stayed with Alana.

It would've been better to be fondled than shot at. Will heard the woman crying as she nursed her aching arm. He should've kept walking – he didn't need to come into this gas station. Alas, here he was, about to get blown into bits by vampire thugs. Brian would never let Will hear the end of this if he survived.

Feverishly long seconds passed before Will caught the glimpse of the cashier crawling from underneath the counter. He had tucked a rather long, hunting-style rifle underneath his arm. He made eye contact with the fledgling, who, gestured for the cashier to bring the gun over. The two assailants kept arguing with one another as the first one nursed a broken nose and bruised ego. The cashier met with Will behind the aisle and handed him the rifle. It was reminiscent of one his father had mantled in the living room. Will checked the chamber and was relieved to see a round tucked inside.

One shot. Will considered his options; his only option. He had an impeccable aim, courtesy of his father's rigorous rabbit hunting rendezvouses, but only *one* bullet. Sure, he could injure one of the vampires, but not before the other one ripped him apart. He squeezed his eyes shut

to think. He had to be considerate of the cashier and the woman. The vampires had no qualms on killing him and would surely do the same to them if Will couldn't kill them now.

What would Brian do? The Brujah easily could've taken down these vampires with the flick of his wrist, or at least, with ease. Will was sure of it, but of all times he needed Brian the most, the Brujah was nowhere in vicinity. Will could kick his own ass for being so stubborn, but it was Brian's fault for leaving him behind.

Will raised his head just to see where the vampires were but was met by another bullet firing his direction. He hunkered down as the cashier was shaking unconsolably on the floor. He steeled himself and kept a strong grip on the rifle in his lap.

The fledgling spun around onto his feet and cocked the rifle towards the vampire with the shattered nose. The pistol in the vampire's bloodied hand was already dangerously prepared for the next shot, but in the briefest of moments, a shot rang out in the gas station. The kickback of the rifle sent a jolt up Will's arm when he shot, but the bullet racing across the gas station made up for it. It found it's home in the vampire's chest and he was thrown back. The other vampire yelled and launched himself in the air. He came towards Will with blinding speed as the fledgling held the rifle like a baseball bat.

He swung and the rifle made contact with the vampire's face; knocking him back into the shelves. The cashier screamed and scurried away as Will vaulted over the aisle — meeting the vampire with another '*thump*' from the rifle. The fledgling kept swinging as each hit sent blood and viscera up his face. His voices urged him on as the rifle was bloodied. He was only stopped because of the other vampire, now oozing from his chest wound, had begun to flee from the back door.

Will was going to give chase, but he continued whacking the vampire underneath him into a bloody pulp. Nothing was recognizable saved for the blue bandana the vampire had wrapped around his head; now bashed open like a rotted jack-o-lantern. It was far from a killing blow – the vampire hadn't combusted by the time Will gave the final *whack*. He threw the battered rifle aside and huffed. He was drenched head to toe in the gore, but he didn't care. The adrenaline constricting his veins held him in a higher state of fight-or-flight. He looked to where the cashier and the woman held each other — frightened by the carnage Will had unleashed in the now destroyed gas station.

The fledgling wiped his face with his bloodied sleeve as he went to the counter. He dug in his pockets for his rolled-up wad of dollars and sat it on the counter. He didn't bother giving the exact amount of his purchase. Will picked up his bag and walked out the gas station. The cold air froze the blood staining his face and it was rejuvenating. The pent-up frustration he had bottled up seemed to evaporate in a mist of relief. As he walked towards the street, he heard the gas station door pinging again. The woman was standing in the illuminating light and gestured for him to come back.

Reluctantly, he came back to where she was crying, but relieved she wasn't assaulted or worse. She nursed her misshapen arm and Will could see the bone jutting underneath the skin. She expressed her gratitude though she was much more afraid of him than her two would-be-attackers. Unless it was the shock settling in, she was awfully jubilant compared to moments before.

He feigned his coyness but accepted her gratitude by asking her for her silence. She agreed and even told him her name, in case, he would like to join her for a drink. Again, Will feigned the courtesy of giving her an answer as he walked away. What he wanted to drink was something far redder and savorier in nature.

“My name is Carmen!”, the woman announced into the openness of the night. “Like the opera!”

Will began to dig in his bag as he walked down the street. He took out his pack of gum and began to devour several sticks. His jaw ached, but the pain was a welcomed diversion. It kept him from turning around, grabbing her by her slender neck, and draining her dry. Like the ending crescendo of the opera – he would’ve drained her till her scream became a mere whisper on the wind. What feral hunger growling deep in his core was temporarily soothed by the bitterness of the gum he smacked on. He restrained himself as the gas station became merely a mirage behind him.

“I’ll haunt you another time, *Carmen*.”

A Golden Goose

Chapter Summary

A prominent figure goes missing in Baltimore and Brian severs ties with a life-long ally.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings for explicit language and depictions of violence. Please continue with caution.

XIII

"A Golden Goose"

"What do you mean he's *missing*?", Brian inquired, as he pulled another cigarette out of a fresh pack.

The Last Call was closed for the night, an exception, because Matthew never closed the bar down. Rain or hellfire, *The Last Call* never had a night off. However, they had pressing business to attend to. He sat across from Matthew and Freddie — the both seemingly annoyed as of late. Especially Matthew, as the Anarch leader was prone to fits, and Freddie shared in the Anarch leader's disposition. The Brujah cared little for the younger vampires' attitudes as he didn't like to beat around the bush. When he wanted to know something, it was *right* away.

"No one has heard from him in weeks, Brian.", Freddie answered, finishing her drink now warm in the cup. "If Faust doesn't want to be found, he knows how to hide himself."

"He's been gone for too long.", the Brujah kicked his legs up onto the nearby coffee table. "Especially with how *shit* is going these days."

Bartholomew Faust, better known as the *Dr. Faust*, was the current Malkavian primogen of Baltimore. He was an eccentric man whose whims of madness was as frequent as night and day. He was just shy of being nearly four centuries old, but even for vampire standards, he was an elder. The Brujah had the displeasure of meeting the Malkavian only a few times, but those said few times was obnoxious.

Dr. Faust dabbled in the macabre in his mansion. He was a tinkerer of flesh; a mad surgeon. His constructions were crafted from a nightmare as they were mended with foreign limbs and mania. Chimeras of all sorts haunted the halls of Faust's abode in painful agony. Sadistic, Dr. Faust had no regard on the suffering of others. Whether that was born from his immortality, it was hard to say as the mad surgeon had not one compassionate bone in his body.

Other than that, he was a recluse preferring only the company of his books and his ghoulish housekeepers. He only had a few moments of lucidity, as far as Brian knew, but very rare. When he wasn't entranced by delirium, he was a sycophant with too much of an axe to grind against Baltimore's Anarchs. Really, Brian could give less than a shit of the primogen being missing — but it would complicate the politics of Baltimore out of their favor.

Primogens acted as ambassadors for their respective clans — hence the panic of Dr. Faust's disappearance had started to cause. The word had spread within Malkavian circles upon the revelation, just as Baltimore learned of it. Surely the Malkavians of Baltimore, Will included, would be either defenseless or irresponsible without their primogen to hold the reins.

Without a Brujah primogen sitting on the Prince's council, the Anarchs were left to investigate the old-fashioned way. Unique as it was for Brujahs to be without their own primogen, it left them not being in the loop of things. Whether it was because of the Brujah clan's precarious nature or innate rejection of authority, Brian wouldn't want some snobby, all-knowing jerk dictating what he can and cannot do.

The Brujah began to cycle through the many associates he knew that could have the slightest clue where Dr. Faust had disappeared to. His leads became dead ends as seemingly no one knew where the Malkavian primogen had disappeared to.

On the other hand, Dr. Faust was no friend to the Anarchs. The Anarchs didn't need Dr. Faust and vice versa. He was a die-hard Camarilla devotee — as devoted as they came. Over the years, however, his loyalty had begun to wane as his madness deteriorated much of his senses. Enough so that he started to communicate his rising concerns on the state of vampire kind with would-be his rivals. Or anyone that would lend him their ear. Brian would argue that Dr. Faust was the sanest vampire in Baltimore regardless of what anyone else said. The Anarchs could use his rambling lips to their advantage, had they known where he disappeared to.

Dr. Faust didn't attend most Camarilla events, rather, he preferred to remain hidden in his ever so expansive mansion. The few he did attend he promptly bared his face and absconded. Through the grapevine, Dr. Faust had grown out of favor with his consorts, the Prince included, as he harbored harsh criticisms for the Camarilla. Rich, coming from Hannibal, as he had the nerve to criticize others but couldn't take it himself.

The last Brian had heard of Dr. Faust, he was holed up in his mansion in Virginia with only his ghouls as company. It wasn't abnormal as the mad doctor kept relatively to himself, but his presence – lack thereof, had been noted. Not even his ghoulish spawns could account for his presence. That was troubling as vampires like Dr. Faust simply didn't *vanish*.

No, they were more than capable of defending themselves from would be hunters or enemies, but for word to reach the Anarchs he's been missing meant something was amiss. The

Camarilla was chattering up a storm after their fiery showcase the previous night, but only whispered about Dr. Faust's disappearance. Brian would've liked to know that the Prince finally eliminated Faust from all their hairs, but that was unlikely as the Prince needed the Malkavian primogen politically.

"No, Brian is right.", Matthew said. "Faust wouldn't hide himself for this long if he wasn't dead."

Freddie raised her eyebrows and Brian sighed in relief — finally, one of them had common sense to see what truly was going on. Matthew got up to went to the loft window. He looked out to the street where several people, vampires specifically, had begun to hang outside. They chattered and yipped amongst themselves, as they were awfully young, possibly freshly turned childer. The anticipation was festering in the night's air as change was happening.

As refreshing as it was to see the vampires of Baltimore involved in their city, it left the Anarchs particularly open. Brian or Matthew couldn't vet every vampire that busted through their doors demanding a patch and a cause — hell, the newcomers flooded in on an hourly basis. Their enthusiasm was greatly appreciated, but the Camarilla mastered the art of sabotage and with every newcomer meant an undiscovered threat in their midst. Matthew politely turned their eagerness back towards their own neighborhoods, but nonetheless, newcomers still lined the block in the hopes of wearing the Anarch's patch.

Brian looked at his own patch etched into his skin. He had opted for something permeant as clothes tended to degrade from wear and tear. He remembered every prick and prod of the tattoo artist's needles sketching down his skin. As fresh as it was one day one, the bright red ink grounded him in hard times. The Brujah looked to where two vampires had begun to argue with one another then punches were thrown. The crowd chanted them along and Matthew quipped his head around. The Anarch leader opened the window and as quickly as the fight started, it disbursed as the crowd cowered under Matthew's glare.

The Brujah laughed. Those prospective anarchists-to-be couldn't throw a molotov cocktail to save their lives or hold their own in a fight. It wasn't their fault — most of them were too young to have to watch their backs from every shadow. A new generation but unburdened by the old scars of their sires. Brian along with Matthew and Freddie had their fair share of protests, would-be revolutions, and coups but the vampires clustering outside couldn't imagine having to carry their dismembered compatriots away from hellfire. Or would they ever themselves carry the burden of burying their compatriots' ashes.

Brian saw it in Matthew's face every night; rage. Many times the Anarch leader would have fits of wrath and destroy everything within the vicinity. He was a Brujah — it was in their blood. Yet, Matthew had a thousand years' worth of a temper underneath his skin. It was inherited, of course, as Matthew hadn't always been the firecracker he grown to be.

After all, Matthew was *the* Nines Rodriguez's prodigy. Matthew didn't mention it to most as he didn't want to be coddled under Nines' reputation. His prodigy wasn't a fan of the limelight, rather, he had his heart invested into the Revolt. The Brujah saw Nines in Matthew. He was a splitting image of Nines — personality wise and had thrice the anger his mentor ever possessed. Their matter of speech, their resolve, and even their aptitude for revolutionary change was undeniable.

Yet, Matthew was more an Anarch than Nines was at his age. He didn't cower from a fight rather he ran straight towards it. Los Angeles Anarchs differed vastly from their Baltimore counterparts. Whereas Los Angeles had the romantic idea of a revolution, Baltimore was gritty and unforgiving

Although cut from the same cloth, Matthew took the teachings of Nines, his own determination, and the Baltimore Anarchs before them into his activism. That made him stronger than Nines himself, if Brian had a say.

The Brujah had seen it in Matthew; the power to lead, but it was Matthew's own inner nature sabotaging him. He was rejuvenated seeing Baltimore burn but now his eyes burned in unbridled rage. It was the bane of their clan — hundreds of years' worth of anger flowed through their bloodline with each generation. Brian didn't have a cap on his anger either, but Matthew was a wildfire.

"Christ.", Matthew scolded, pointing out the vampires outside still whooping and hollering. "We might as well open a daycare."

"Don't jinx it, Matt.", Freddie warned, joining the Anarch leader at the window. They were close to one another, intimately so, as Freddie was curled against Matthew's side. "You don't even know how to change diapers."

Matthew laughed and brushed off her rebuttal. He looked to where Brian had a cigarette hanging from his lips, hyperaware of what was happening in front of him, and Matthew shyly moved away from the Toreador. He sat down next to Brian and folded his hands.

"Anything new with the kid?", the Anarch asked to change the mood. "He's still kicking?"

The Brujah cocked an eyebrow and shrugged.

"Yeah, believe it or not. The kid's alright. I left him with the Baroness."

"*The Baroness*?", Freddie interrupted. "You might've well left him out in the sun. Let me guess, something about her *twin* sister again?"

"Aren't you a smart cookie, *spitfire*?", Brian beamed a toothy grin at the Toreador.

Freddie had nothing but bad blood for the Baroness. For good reason, of course, as their ideologies clashed; pro-Camarilla to anti-Camarilla. In every right, Bella was made a Baroness through the Anarch tradition, but that didn't mean she wasn't two-faced with the Camarilla. Matthew's predecessor had bestowed the title onto Bella, but in no shape or form did she deserve it. Matthew was indifferent towards her, but it was Freddie that was the most offended. As Toreadors, they remained civil with one another, but Freddie was nothing but civil. If she had her way — the Baroness would've been staked by now.

"And you're *right*."

Brian had no other safer option, not with vampire molotovs coming through the doorway.

“What else? You didn’t go down to the *Insanitarium* to chat over drinks with the Baroness.”, Freddie quipped while eyeing the Brujah suspiciously. “Why did you go over there?”

Matthew glanced at Brian, but knew it was better not to intervene when either of them argued. The Brujah pinched the bridge of his nose and broke a tendril of smoke off his cigarette. The last thing he needed was a lecture, especially not from Freddie, and the guard he kept on his tongue was unshackled.

“Look, I had to cash in a favor for the kid.”, he argued. “Unlike the rest of us, he doesn’t have a *fucking* sire to look out for him.”

Brian flicked his cigarette into the ashtray.

“So cut me some *fucking* slack already.”, his tone was rough, almost overwhelming as there was a growl rolling off the tongue.

Freddie sucked in her teeth and looked away. She was embarrassed, more so because she hadn’t given thought to Brian’s predicament, and she was being a jerk. It was not entirely her fault, as Brian watched her, she was still a *childe* herself. The Anarch leader patted the Brujah’s leg and got up. He went to Freddie still red in the face and wrapped his arm around her.

“I’m sorry, Freddie…”, the Brujah apologized. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

The Toreador shook her hand and a smile lit up her face. She rubbed the corners of his eyes and untangled herself from Matthew’s protective grip.

“He’s lucky, you know?”, she mentioned. “Not all sires are by blood. Especially not the kind like *you*.”

She was right — their own sires respectively were *terrible*. Brian’s chest felt heavy as he tried to brush off the ensuing tears with a chuckle. Truly, he would have never guessed he would be a role model for anyone let alone a step-sire for a lone fledgling. He hadn’t even thought of embracing his own *childe* preferring for his bloodline to end with him. Yet, Will Graham, with all his flaws and imperfections, meant more than anything Brian had ever known. Whether he was laughing, crying, or just absent-minded — Will was everything Brian could’ve ever wanted in a progeny. The way his eyelashes fluttered when he slept or how he seemingly knew what Brian was thinking.

He lit another cigarette.

“Faust can come later, but what do we know about the sarcophagus?”, Matthew asked, changing the subject.

Brian hadn’t thought about the sarcophagus for days since he had been preoccupied with Will. However, it was more urgent than locating Faust. Every vampire in Baltimore had been chatting up a storm over it, but Brian knew better to talk about things he didn’t know about.

Freddie cleared her throat.

“My sources say it’ll be moved to the Baltimore Natural History Museum within a week. The ship – as far as I know, will be docked indefinitely.”

“Who’s moving the box?”, Brian inquired. “Camarilla or cops?”

“Baltimore P.D, but I don’t doubt Hannibal has something to do with it.”, Freddie said, pulling out her smart phone from her pocket. She began to scroll through it as Matthew and Brian looked on.

She held it up to display the gritty picture of the gilded, carved sarcophagus lying dormant in the ship’s hull. It was bigger than what Brian expected – it was a coffin that could’ve fit four corpses comfortably on top of each other. Yet, he couldn’t help but to bristle when he stared at the photo. Even Matthew seemed to jitter.

“We have to grab that shit.”, Matthew pointed out. “If Hannibal wants it so fucking bad, what’s stopping us from taking it first?”

“Well, I don’t know…the fact that we don’t know a goddamn thing about this thing other than it gives *everyone* the heebie-jeebies.”, Freddie argued, sliding her phone back into her pocket.

“So?”

“What do you mean *so*?”, Freddie rebutted. “We are going in there stupidly fucking blind.”

Matthew folded his arms. He crinkled his eyebrows tightly together and there was a quiver in his jaw.

“Hannibal is going to keep winning unless we stop him.”, the Anarch argued. “Who the fuck *cares* what’s in the box? We just need to get it away from him.”

“Because we don’t know what is *inside* that box. For all we know, it’s a fucking atomic bomb.”, Freddie’s face had begun to turn as red as her hair.

“Who said we had to open it?”, Brian counterargued. “We just simply have to go get it.”

“See, Fred? It’s two against one here.”, Matthew beamed at the female Anarch. “Come on…”

Freddie huffed, but Matthew kept a glimmer in his eye. Though the picture made the hairs curl on all their necks, it was the only plan they had. They were on a losing streak, and without the capital Hannibal possessed, the manpower, and the political advantages – they would continue to lose till a stake came for their chests. It was settled as once the Anarch leader sat his mind on something, he was unrelentless.

“Fine, but I’m not taking the blame if this shit backfires.”, she surrendered. “Don’t open this thing.”

“It’s a plan – Brian and Freddie will look into the sarcophagus, and I’ll look into Faust.”, the Anarch silenced any criticisms Freddie had left with a single look.

The female Anarch left the room in a hurry. Brian understood her concerns as he was also concerned on what lied inside the sarcophagus – more than what Matthew seemed to be as the Anarch leader was aloof to what was inside of it. Brian was no student of vampire history, but for the sarcophagus to show up at this very time was more than just coincidence. Whatever was inside, supernatural or not, it left a queasy feeling in the Anarch's guts.

Matthew gestured for Brian to stand beside him – the Anarch joining his friend at the window overlooking the street below. The Anarch leader slicked his greasy brown hair back with his hand before looking over to his friend. His demeanor was cool, laxed – something Matthew never was, and Brian took mental note of it. The Anarch leader pointed to the vampires that had assembled back onto the street corner.

"You know I do it for them, right?", he suggested. "Every last one of them."

The Brujah made a 'hm' and leaned against the windowsill, looking out to the vampires who idly lingered while some disappearing into the shadows of the night. Matthew didn't need to prove to Brian that he was a man of action, no, especially not to Brian as he's seen the Anarch brave the worst of conditions. However, Brian wasn't going to kiss Matthew's ass either.

"Of course I do, Matt, but if you can't leash that anger of yours – it'll all be for nothing.", Brian warned, already noticing the tenseness returning into Matthew's scowl. "Nines didn't teach you to be that way."

The Anarch leader huffed.

"Yeah and there's a lot of shit he didn't teach me", he admitted. "But *goddamnit*, I'm doing everything I can against that stuck-up asshole, pretty boy face of a Prince."

"Oh you think he's *pretty* now?", the Brujah jested, seeing how flushed Matthew had turned. "You thinking about sleeping with the enemy?"

"That's not what I fucking meant and you *know* it.", Matthew gritted.

"Sure…"

Brian stifled his laughter as the Anarch leader was apparently *dead* serious, but it was still comical to the Brujah. Matthew had the bark and some bite, but he was still a dreamer. Hannibal was practically untouchable to them, no matter how many businesses they firebombed, and it was unlikely Matthew was going to fulfill his wish of strangling the Prince. Yet, the Brujah would let the young Anarch dream on.

"Look, cap off some of that anger so you don't fuck up anything else.", the Brujah turned away from Matthew and the window.

The Anarch scoffed and continued to gaze out to the vampires outside.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?", the Anarch leader suggested.

Brian shrugged. The night was relatively young, but he knew when he wasn't wanted.

“Don’t start picking fights with the newbies downstairs either.”

Matthew didn’t avert his gaze from the window, but Brian acknowledged his dismissal and began to take his leave.

“Be careful out there.”, the Anarch leader warned. “There’s something in the air tonight.”

Brian nodded and left the upper loft. He caught a glimpse of Freddie chattering angrily away at the hapless bartender. He gave her a passing smirk and the Toreador only shot him a pissed look back. He made up his mind to return to *The Insanitarium* to pick up Will before retiring for the night. He hailed a nearby cab to take him back to the other side of town.

Outside, the nightclub remained a popular place as new guests arrived with drugs and liquor in hand. Had Brian been a younger vampire, he would’ve been plastered by now but nevertheless, he outgrew his partying days. Inside, Lou waved at him from the bar and Brian took the elevator up to the Baroness’s space. He knocked on the door before he let himself in.

However, the living space was eerily quiet as Brian walked in. The lights were dimmed except for the kitchen’s overhead light and Brian quickly took notice that Will was nowhere to be seen. Upstairs, Bella must’ve heard his entrance because she descended the stairs in a hurry. She tied her robe together to shield her nudity as Brian was mere moments from interrogating her. He caught his tongue as she was the Baroness, and to disrespect her in her own *elysium* certainly meant death.

“Brian, I didn’t expect you to return without my sis-“, the Baroness started, her tone beginning to take on its condescending tempo.

“Where did Will go?”, Brian interrupted, pointing out the vacant couch. “He was supposed to stay here.”

Bella crossed her arms and scowled.

“I am the Baroness, not a babysitter, or have you forgotten who I am?”, she argued.

“That’s not what I asked – Where’s Will?”

“Elsewhere.”, the Baroness said coldly. “Obviously not where you left him.”

Brian couldn’t stand the way Bella flaunted the foreboding title to everyone. With chivalry thrown out the window, Brian’s main concern was locating Will and it was only the Baroness who knew of his presence within her walls.

“Don’t forget *who* made you the Baroness, Bella.”, Brian retorted harshly, brushing aside Bella to ascend upstairs. “You made me a promise.”

“How dare you…”, Bella began, her tirade falling short as Brian had disappeared up the stairs. “Do you think I have time to babysit baby vampires all night, Anarch?”

She could only seethe at his accusation as she watched him at the foot on the stairs. The Brujah opened every door to every room, peaking his head inside each, but finding only

disappointment. He furrowed his brows as he stood in the hallway – mere moments from kicking down all the walls. Of all people, he had expected Bella to be courteous enough to at *least* consider keeping Will put.

He growled and slammed his hand against the wall, causing a painting to shake, and finally hit the floor. The Baroness was quick to scorn the Brujah for his destructiveness, but he didn't care. He descended as the Baroness was quick to hinder his path.

"Apologize. Now.", she demanded, her eyes turning scornfully enraged. "Or I'll kill you where you stand."

The threat fell on deaf ears as Brian knew the Baroness had not an ounce of strength to render him incapacitated, or kill him, and Bella knew she couldn't match the Brujah's strength. She would've been foolish to attempt to physically overpower Brian as even as a vampire – she hadn't had the years or aptitude over the Brujah. Whether it was natural for Toreadors to be coddled, they weren't fighters, less so as time and time again they proved they were romantics, and easily squeamish with the idea of conflict.

"Get out of my way, *Baroness*.", there was a growl in the Brujah's tone as the beast within bubbled to the surface. He bit the inside of his cheek to abate the mounting pressure. "I have nothing more to say to you."

"How *dare* you disrespect me in my own home, *Anarch*? Have you no shame?", Bella argued as the Brujah pushed her aside. "It's not *my* responsibility to look after wayward childer let alone appease you Anarchs on hand and knee. To *think* I'd agree to harbor another Anarch under my roof with the Prince breathing down my neck!"

"Consider yourself *lucky* I hadn't put a word out you Anarchs are sulking around here."

Snake.

Brian should've listened to Freddie, better yet, he was going to apologize when he saw her again. He had thought the kinship that he shared with the Baroness once upon a full moon would've eclipsed her wanton need to grovel at the Prince's feet, but he was mistaken.

"I see why your sister runs away from you.", Brian accused. "She can't stand being around you."

"You think you knowing everything, don't you, Anarch?", the Baroness hissed. "You don't know anything about being in my position."

"You're so full of shit, Bella. Do you know that?", the Brujah accused. "You flip your script now for what? So your Prince can tell you how much of a good girl you are? He'll kill you as soon as he doesn't want you anymore."

"Is that what you think, Anarch?", Bella's smile had curved into a downwards frown. "I can say the same about your little, precious *fledgling*."

The Brujah turned abruptly on his heels – the self-control unrestrained as the searing, crushing pressure of his anger seeped from underneath. The Baroness bared her fangs and hissed as the Brujah bristled, fists balled, and was about to approach her. Brian could care less if the Baroness wished him ill-will, but to spite Will, as innocent as he was to his afflictions, broke what little restrictions the Brujah kept on his morality.

However, the Brujah stopped, took a deep breath, and stilled the beast dwelling underneath his skin. The riled-up anger simmered down to a boil and he was soon back to his neutrality. The Baroness, still poised to defend herself, kept her jaded eyes locked onto any movement the Brujah performed. He wasn't going to let her unhinge what he spent decades suppressing – not this way, as she was nothing more than a figurehead, a presumptuous attempt to maintain Anarch tradition, and a pain to his side. Brian could stake himself for ever pursing a romantic endeavor with the Baroness.

"When the Prince and his Camarilla fakes are out of Baltimore, you're *next*.", the Brujah warned throwing another wayward look to the Baroness. "Consider this your break-up with the Anarchs."

"You aren't a Baroness anymore and don't expect the Anarchs to respect you as such."

The Baroness threw her hands onto her hips.

"I should've never *fucked* you, you know?", she rebutted. "One of these nights, I'll have you, your Anarch friends, and that *fledgling* staked."

"Whatever you say, *cammie*.", the Brujah went to the front door, swung it open, and stepped into the hallway.

The Baroness tutted and went upstairs, presumably to harp to her Camarilla cohorts over their encounter, but the Brujah cared little for the tattle-telling. His main concern was knowing Will's whereabouts, especially now with the Camarilla having their attentions turned to the Anarchs, and with the sarcophagus making everyone nervous. The Brujah descended back into the nightclub from the elevator and gave Lou one last 'adieu' before exiting.

Baltimore, much to the Brujah's surprise, was relatively bustling as people, kine and kindred, were pacing the concrete arteries of the city. He looked to where a lone cab remained beached underneath a streetlamp and he approached. The driver inside was preoccupied with their newspaper, but their eyes found Brian as the Anarch tapped the window. The cab's passenger door was unlocked, and Brian slipped inside.

"Where to?", the cab driver asked, his hushed tone crackled with the tinges of insistent chain-smoking.

"1616 Tudor Lane.", the Brujah replied, retrieving a bill from his coat pocket. "Do me a favor and gun it, yeah?"

The cab driver nodded, and Brian sighed. He laid his head back against the worn-out seats of the cab as the driver put the car into drive and undocked from the street. He couldn't think of anything but Will, where the fledgling was, presumably alive, if not somewhere safe. His

hands tightened in his lap as he had to keep gnawing on his lip to keep himself from yelling. Never had he had such strong affinity for anyone, vampire or not, but for Will to preoccupy his waking thoughts sent him overboard. He would never forgive himself if Will was hurt, or in the worst-case scenario, dead because of the Brujah's negligence.

He'd rather burn alive than to see Will hurt.

The cab driver was fastidious in his driving as soon as they embarked, they were in front of the apartment. Brian slipped the driver another bill for the many speed laws they had broken to get to the other side. The cab driver beamed a toothy smile and thanked the Brujah for his generosity. The Brujah quickly entered the apartment and walked up the steps of the foyer.

Down the hallway, Brian broke into a sprint towards the unit. Without a key of his own, he was forced to jiggle the lock till the door gave in to his ministrations. Much to his disappointment and fear, the apartment was empty as well. The lights remained off except for the television – as one of them had forgotten to shut it off before leaving. The Brujah pinched the bridge of his nose to shudder the waves of anxiety roaring over him. He knew of no other place Will could have gone, except for the Prince's tower, and Brian forbade himself from getting near Camarilla territory for his own sake. He dug in his jacket pocket for his cigarettes to find the pack empty, another disappointment, and with Will nowhere in sight, Brian made up his mind to at least find a liquor store.

He made sure to close the apartment door fully, but to not lock it with an absence of a key, and he hoped that with it being unlocked, Will would take it that the Brujah was nearby. He went back downstairs into the streets to find a liquor store, but he kept his eyes and ears keenly aware to any sign of Will. Until Will was back in his presence, he would tear himself in two.

The Brujah bought his cigarettes at the liquor store and haunted the venue to calm his tensed nerves. He would patiently wait, as all sires would do for their childer, and count on Will to make his presence known to his only friend in such a callous city.

Will walked up the steps into the apartment. Outside, his fellow neighbors gossiped over cheap beers and smokes, but Will went straight into the foyer. He sat the plastic bag down near the mailboxes embedded into the wall. He had no need for the food items as he had no hunger to satisfy. Eventually, someone would scavenge through the bag, as it would be a waste to throw out the contents.

He read the numbers on the mailbox and reached for his unit; nine. He wasn't expecting mail, but it gave him a sense of normalcy to check it. Something he would've done if he wasn't a vampire, but nevertheless, he checked anyway. Inside, an envelope was inside.

He sliced it open with his fingernail and took out the letter tucked inside. He read over it:

> *See through the illusions, childe of Malkav,*
>
> *Where others do not dare to see, far beyond,*

Trust not a friend, befriend an enemy,

In a tower, where the doom will rise,

As the gilded cage is opened,

For that is our fate,

As all Kindred must go,

As cryptic as the note was, he didn't have the energy to decipher it. Rather, he was tired of translating fiction from reality, as he'd come to realize he was better off being entirely ignorant to things out of his control.

He tucked the note into his pocket. The analog clock guarded by a bent metal frame above him read only a quarter after two. Will grimaced and eyed the staircase nearby. A shower was the first thing on his mind along with a change of clothes and a drink. He hadn't had a drink since he left the Baroness' loft and his gums had begun to tingle. He thought of the people conversing outside as nourishment, but that idea soured when he noticed the amount of alcohol they were consuming. He left the foyer of the apartment and back onto the sidewalk. To his right at the corner, a bright illuminated sign advertising a clinic blinked.

A blood-bank? Will's thirst ushered for him to walk down the street. Few buildings were open for business at this time of night — specifically, the ones offering patrons a 'good time' looked relatively busy. A shortening line wrapped around the side of the run-down building. He looked past them to see a sign broadcasting money in exchange for donations — an easy way to score a few dollars for a late-night score. He didn't think such a lucrative place existed so closely to his apartment — after all, the *Prince* had it furbished for him and it would've been out of character of him to suggest Will stay in a not-so-favorable locale.

The people waiting in line looked nothing but favorable. They were ragged, hungry, and irritable. Their dingy clothes, guarded faces, and shaky demeanors told Will all he needed to know – addicts, some already crippled by their ravenous cravings, others running on autopilot. Although he looked no better with his clothes stained rouge, he blended in amongst the rabble.

The fledgling lingered a few moments longer as the line began to grow behind him. People eyed him suspiciously but huddled past him to claim their spot in line. He eyed the front door of the clinic and approached, seeing within that it was empty saved for a few nurses and would-be patients, but not entirely full. Before he could wrap his hand around the handle, he felt someone *watching* him. Unsettling as the feeling was, his wits told him to meet the gaze. He looked over his shoulder to see a man behind him.

The stranger shuddered under Will's stare and was about to walk away till the fledgling approached him. The stranger was perturbed as the vampire stared him down.

"A-Are you lost?", the man asked, his expression diluted with fear. "I haven't s-seen you around here?"

Will eyed the stranger up and down. He was relatively young with his streaky brown hair curled behind his ears. His clothes were new — almost department store new. He stood only a few inches taller than Will, but he was small under the vampire's glare, and just as meek. His eyes were a saturated, piss-yellow shade and he shook where he stood.

"I cannot be lost if I'm not found.", replied Will, not seeing how the stranger could possibly know whether he needed directions or not.

As if he had uttered the magic words, the stranger lit up in boyish glee. He practically skipped towards Will and instinctively, the fledgling flashed his fangs. That earned a gasp, but then a boisterous laugh as the stranger was upon him with his own mouth filled with gnarly, misshapen teeth.

"Aw man! Wait…Say that again!", the man squealed. "Please!"

"That wasn't me — that was the other voices in my head.", the Malkavian was pressed against the clinic door as the overzealously friendly stranger was mere inches from his face.

"Aw man. You — You're a *vampire*, arent you?", the stranger's excitement had begun to electrify into bewilderment.

Will felt as if he could combust into flames at that very moment. The very accusation left him with a tightness constricting his arms and legs. There were people around them — surely within earshot between him and the strange man. His fangs weren't retracting either as he had to use his hand to cover them. He was frightened as this wasn't a situation he was exactly briefed on. With his back pressed against the door and no means to escape, Will was inadvertently a prisoner to the man.

"You're crazier than what I see in the mirror.", Will replied, his tone beginning to shake.

The stranger knew Will was bluffing as he didn't budge an inch away from the fledgling. As Will stood there practically paralyzed, the line nearby had dwindled into stragglers. A welcome relief as the less ears that could listen, the bigger the chance no evil had been spoken.

"Aw man…Don't bullshit me man, just come clean, you know. I, man…Oh man! I ain't gonna tell no one. It's okay, I just want to talk.", the man was annoyingly persistent, but Will had nothing else to share let alone talk about with him. The man stepped back which gave Will enough room to abscond.

The fledgling turned around and was quick to open the clinic door. The sudden rush of the air conditioning slapped him in the face, but it was nothing Will wasn't attuned to. However, the stranger behind him caught him by the arm.

"Look, man! I know you're looking for someone! I mean — l know who you're looking for."

Will bore his fangs and that made the man retract his grip. The fledgling raised a hand to cover his mouth as he didn't mean to reveal his fangs, but he felt threatened. The man raised his hands up and Will heard his heartbeat rattle around in his chest.

“Look, I-I don’t mean any trouble…”, the man said, his teeth chattering with newfound nervousness. “I just think I can help you. Y’know?”

Will retracted his gums back into his aching gums and regained his composure. He didn’t know whether this man, or his excitement into vampires, could have anything remotely useful to Will’s business. Yet, he didn’t have any other leads other than finding a so-called ‘party’ at this hour of night. The Baroness would expect information from him, soon, rather not later. The fledgling folded his arms and stared down the man.

“Let’s talk words, golden goose.”

Tartare

Chapter Summary

Will Graham is introduced to a ghoul with information to sell. Hannibal recalls his first encounter in forbidden knowledge.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for depictions of violence and murder. Please continue with caution.

XIV

“Tartare”

“Hell yeah! Oh man, I knew it! I just...Oh geez, I knew you were. I just could tell. I - oh man, this is great. And th-then I saw your teeth an-and I was like, damn! It was like I could just sense you. The name’s Knox Harrington. Pleasure to meet you. Aw man!”, Knox said, trembling his words as he watched Will’s expression dampened into annoyance.

The line stretched around the clinic was nonexistent as Will heard the screech of heavy door followed by locks being clicked. Nearby, people had scurried into their respective alleyways and hidey holes. With the night becoming earlier, Will felt the lulls of his unnatural sleep cycle calling him forth to retire. Soon, he would be forced to go inside, but he didn’t want to lose the overzealous, Knox Harrington.

He wasn’t comfortable with inviting Knox to the apartment, let alone allowing the man to walk with him, and surely wouldn’t ask to meet up with him later. For all he knew, he was one of Hannibal’s spies luring him to do something incriminating. He knew Baltimore and the people – no one was your friend, but everyone was your worst enemy.

He pressed his lips into a thin scowl. He would have to sweeten his next following words seeing how starstruck Knox was about Will’s vampirism.

"Are you also a night’s child?”, Will finally asked, being selective in his wording. “Do you walk in the shadows of the moonlight?”

Knox clasped his hands and when he smiled, his eyes crinkled. He looked to his left, then his right, before coming closer to the fledgling. Uncomfortably close again, Will feigned his

discomfort with his scowl. He could smell the obnoxious cologne Knox must've bathed himself in because it stung his olfactory senses.

"I'm a *ghoul*, you know?", he admitted, seemingly furtive about the reveal.

"I didn't know about any of this stuff until a couple months ago...when this guy appeared, and, well all of a sudden - *bam*! Vampires are real and right in front of my eyes. Blew my goddamn mind!", his voice raised to a shrill holler as he couldn't help but physically tense up in his excitement.

Ghoul. Will only knew of ghouls as the monsters from the Halloween movies he watched as a kid, but they looked nothing like Knox Harrington, unless Knox was hiding his true physique. He expected green skin, some misplaced appendages, and an extreme hunger for brains but Knox outwardly possessed none of that. He was plain, humanly plain, and whether it was for better concealment – Knox didn't look any different than Will, or any other person. It was a simple, yet practical to be as plain as Knox, except for his cadmium-yellow eyes. The not-so-favorable stench of the grave couldn't be masked with the overbearing cologne either.

"Ghoulish as...Wait. What's a ghoul?", Will inquired. "Are you hungry for my brain? You'll only find it rotten."

Knox laughed and shook his head. He seemingly thought over his response as he could tell Will wasn't exactly following along. The fledgling had his attention averted elsewhere as he caught the sight of a young woman coming from around the building. She was brown-haired but her stray hairs were pressed against her face. She walked briskly with her head down and hands balled into her coat pockets. He saw a glimpse of her pretty, but mournful face reddened by the cold.

Nearby, the echoes of something *clattering* against the concrete passed as the young woman was out of sight. He thought he saw feathers follow behind her, like a cloak concealing her identity, but it was only his imagination. Nearby, night birds cawed and echoed their shrills into the sky. Will looked back to Knox.

"Then what is a ghoul?", Will investigated. "You aren't dead, at least I think."

"Well, the way it was explained to me, whenever a vampire lets a human drink some of their vampire blood, the human gains a little vampire power, can heal up quick and that kinda stuff.", Knox replied, rolling his shoulders around as another burst of excitement zapped him.

"Then, they're a "ghoul", and oooh…Watch out!"

Vampire's blood. The revelation that his blood, or vampiric blood, could be shared not only to embrace, but for pleasure was new to Will. He thought of his blood as ordinary as it was in his body, but it seemed not the case as Knox had a tinge of hunger rimmed around his eyes. Will crossed his arms to not give the ghoul any ideas.

"What creature spawned you, golden ghoul?", Will questioned, stepping away from the clinic doors as patients behind them had begun to leave the building. They looked at Knox and Will

as they passed but walked off to their respective destinations.

Knox's shoulders had slumped downwards as he warily looked around. As if some sinister, unknown force was in the air, Knox had become unusually quiet. His cracked lips pursed into a small frown as he couldn't bring himself to look at Will in the eye.

"I really wish I could tell 'yah man, but I don't think I'm supposed to.", Knox admitted, painfully aware of how Will's annoyance turned into cynicism.

Knox was so apt on persuading Will that he *knew* someone that the fledgling was looking for, but to rescind his word was more than annoying. Will was wasting his time with the ghoul and as he turned away to walk away from the clinic for good, the ghoul ushered for him to stay.

His voices, however, urged the fledgling to continue walking away. As the rats in the sewer scurried under their feet and the sludge churned in the tunnels, it was becoming a swirl of garbled noises. Will's lower eyelid had begun to twitch as it was becoming stressful to hear both Knox and the cacophony of sounds brewing in his head.

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Tell me who tied your leash or so help me, I'll eat you *alive*.", he warned Knox, earning a distressed look from the ghoul.

"Look, I-I don't want any trouble man. My m-master's a pretty *nasty* dude. You know? A really *nasty* dude.", Knox stumbled to find his words as Will relaxed, allowing his body to slack rather than tense. "We aren't even from *here*!"

"Where is this *nasty* dude you speak of, *zombie*?", Will interrogated. "Say his name."

"He just appears, man. He gave me this "secret mission" and ghosted on me. I-I really want to help you, aw geez, but I can't man. He could kill us *both*!", with that Knox had fled towards the street.

For a ghoul, he was quick on his feet as Knox made haste to trek across the street, far away from Will and his supernatural grasp.

Will wasn't going to give chase — it would've been pointless because of Knox's extreme fear of *not* telling Will about his so called "master". Wherever Knox was fleeing to, Will hoped he'd never have to see that lying *ghoul* again, and if he did he swore to tear his lying throat to shreds. He abandoned his fixation for a drink as he walked back to the apartment. He had more questions than he did answers, but Brian was gone, and he had no one else to ask. The apartment, however, felt strange as the front door was left unlocked and Will was sure he'd locked it before they had left for the night.

He was cautious as he turned on the light, noticing the television still on in the living room, but nothing scurried or bumped in the apartment. Finetuning his ears to any and every sound around him, he listened closely. He heard not a knock, bump, or thump in the apartment

except for the television. Alas, Will was alone and it was a welcoming relief as he had enough of the many denizens of Baltimore harassing him for the night.

Yet, he was strung out by the violence of the night — his bloodied knuckles and scraped face was telling in the bathroom mirror. He did his best to scrub the blood off his skin, change his clothes, and find some relative comfort in being clean again.

His reflection bothered him as he could no longer recognize himself; just a visage of what he used to be. His eyes kept a persistent tinge of gold around them, but his skin had paled and grew visibly sunken. His physique, though he was never brawny, had diminished into a slender, lean shell. His gums were bloodied, if not tender to the touch, even worse, his fangs protruded through the delicate flesh and could no longer be determined as human canines. Though he had his hair cropped just a night previously, his curls had started to regrow and tickle the shells of his ears. He raised his hands up to his face and saw branching blue-purple vessels tattooing his pale flesh.

With the sudden onslaught of changes, he didn't recognize himself. It was frightening to say the least as Will couldn't accept or be content with the adjustments his body had taken to his unnatural lifestyle. His mind was nowhere near sane, or at least that what a psychiatrist would call it as, and he too had his own delusions about whether he was truly adequate to handle his new way of thinking.

He didn't like the changes to his physicality or mentality. He didn't feel a tinge of remorse when he battered the gas station assailant into smithereens or did he feel it against the Nosferatu in the sewers. He was never violent in his past life, rather, he was on the receiving end of violence. He abhorred fights and arguments, but recently his nightly travels brought him closer to carnage. His bloodlust hadn't been quelled, his fangs wouldn't retract, no matter how he tried to slide them inwards into his gums. He was far from a man, on the precipice of becoming a beast, and he was losing hold of himself. At this point, he was driven by his thirst and need of survival – almost like a primal-state of being, but still had a functioning façade.

The least of it all, he was discovering strength where he had none before. He felt it when he and Brian was at the shipyard for Chilton – the strangeness of obscuring himself from the wandering security guard. He felt it again when he fought the Nosferatu, then the thugs at the store, and when he interrogated Knox. It was beyond strange to have strengths he had never been schooled in before. It wasn't as scary as his bloodlust, but it did leave him curious to discover his prowess, and his weaknesses. He would ask Brian, as the Anarch would be a better mentor, but Will desperately needed to grasp his primality.

Will backed away from his reflection and settled uncomfortably onto the couch. He laid down on his side and hugged himself. He hoped the Brujah would return within the night, as they had grown comfortably well with one another, but the older vampire's movements were untraceable. Seemingly enough, Brian had his own nightly agenda, fueled by his political affiliations, but nothing Will had introduced to. In due time, Will hoped to have some knowledge of the Brujah and his affiliation, but he had to figure out vampirism first.

As he laid there, staring aimlessly at the nightly broadcast humming in front of him, his head would rise to check the front door occasionally. He'd left the apartment door unlocked, given

he was the only one with a key, and if Brian were to return, he wouldn't have to pick the lock. After a certain time, Will grew disappointed as not once he heard the Brujah, or anyone for that matter, enter the apartment. He turned to lay on his stomach.

Red, blotchy tears bubbled underneath his lids, but he did not dare to cry into the emptiness of the apartment. He wouldn't cry, as it was not the vampire's way, and they would only drown him in his sorrow.

Hannibal had no desire to sate his physical hunger, but he thrived in his kitchen. Although he couldn't digest the meals he created, the practice itself was a calming mantra he rehearsed with every new recipe. His kitchen was his escape from the carnivorous world of politics. The appliances were state-of-the-art; stainless steel and equipped with the latest technology. The counters dark, but glimmered with the constant polishing Hannibal greased on them. Outside the kitchen, Hannibal had no favoritism for any other room.

The rest of the penthouse was somber, hauntingly quiet except for the whispers of a beautiful bel canto in the air. The lights were dimmed, not enough to darken the space completely, but enough to add mood to the décor. The longing notes of the song only added to the atmosphere as tonight was lonesome and silent, except for the sounds of whisking, boiling, and prodding Hannibal was performing in his kitchen. His mood, much cheerier than the bel canto's, was pleasantly keen into his cooking.

The Prince had arranged for florists to decorate his dining table with gladioli, dyed roses, and chrysanthemums. He commissioned for deer antlers and their respective heads in between each vase. It was all very macabre, as Hannibal was a dramatic for the weary and grim, and it complimented the darkness of the penthouse. A homage, really, as Hannibal replicated the dark, sometimes comedic nature of death.

After all, he already had transcended beyond the mortal death.

For a centerpiece, he brought out his favorite trophy — the skull of the greatest beast to ever exist, the human man. He arranged the skull to face him at the head of the table, almost mockingly, as the skull was dead, unable to partake in the cuisine Hannibal would spread out amongst the table. Ironically enough, the Prince couldn't eat either, alas, another joke on death.

Hannibal glanced at the skull on the table and he could remember the exact human it belonged to. His memory, impeccably sharp, could recall the many features that once fleshed the ivory-bleached skull.

The face once belonged to an aged, tired face of a worn man. The skin had once been pinkish, with blemishes and scars, but pleasantly warm to the touch. Wisps of silvery-blonde hair once coiled around trained ears. The eye sockets were tight and wrinkled but held years upon years of vampire-hunting expertise. The hunter it belonged to had long been dead, but Hannibal was a fanatic for trophies.

Hannibal slipped his current dish into the oven and joined the skull at the table. He ran his finger over and under the skull, remembering all the features, almost like he was categorizing

them. The Prince wasn't remorseful as he looked over the skull, rather, he was apathetic. Death wasn't as final as humans thought hence his lack of empathy to their demises. Humans fetishized their ends, but Hannibal could not bring himself to care so much.

For he had lived for a thousand lifetimes and he simply wasn't harbored by the fear of the inevitable end.

The Prince left his reminiscing to turn his attention to finish setting the table. He would've invited Bedelia to share dinner with him, but alas, she had other matters demanding her attention. Hannibal wasn't slighted by her refusal as he was a creature of the night – inhibited by the turning of the day, and she was exclusively bound to the day. His business convened at the turn of the day, whilst Bedelia was prohibited by her need of sleep, and it made them rather incompatible for breakfast or dinner.

The Prince was without close acquaintances therefore he had no dinner guests to entertain. Normally, dinner was meant to entertain and socialize with friends, would-be enemies, or anyone with a palate, but Hannibal was his own guest. Mundane as dinners had started to be, it was an opportunity to impress himself whether it was in décor, the courses, or to curb his boredom. With every dinner. he tried to impress himself – going grander than the last, but nevertheless, it was tediously dull to sit at the table by himself.

The act of preparing food was useless, even considerably futile, but the way meats, vegetables, and spices came together to make dishes piqued and excited the Prince. He had traveled to many lands to discover the culinary secrets of each, but without hunger, he could only study the process. He liked to smell spices, but he couldn't taste them. He had learned to steam, blanch, and stir-fry almost every vegetable though his stomach didn't fantasize for a nibble. He was taught to pick fruit, to render their skin to reveal their juicy flesh, but alas he wasn't meant to eat them. Meat was another disappointment as cooked meat lost its vitality — the bloody redness darkening into a greasy, brown sludge, very unsightly to Hannibal's refined palate.

With those shortcomings, it didn't deter Hannibal from at least *trying* to eat again. There were many times he was invited to sup with his hosts. Grateful to experience the communal act of eating, he accepted the dishes his hosts would bring to him. However, the food simply didn't *want* to exist within his body. Several times had Hannibal retched what his hosts believed was their best dish. The Prince apologized as it was rude of him to regurgitate their meticulously crafted cuisines, but his immortal body could no longer synthesize the food properly.

After several failed attempts, he began to loathe how mortals engorged themselves on delicacies he could only imagine eating. As the centuries went on, food became processed and mediocre. Hannibal was particularly offended by anything wrapped in plastic and available out of vending machines. Nourishment for vampires was simple in nature — blood, and nothing more. The Prince vehemently opposed the very fact that he *needed* just blood only to preserve his body as the modern world teased him with culinary creations new and old.

Undefeated, Hannibal turned a great section of his office into a two-tiered library stocked with books from the old and new world. His older books were bound in leather, animal-skin,

or the occasional human hide. Their contents within had been transcribed from languages dead and alive, but nonetheless, Hannibal hoarded their knowledge within the shelves. He knew of every book he curated, their spines felt well-over by Hannibal's diligent hands, and he could recall many word-from-word.

Other books described clans, some extinct, others faded into obscurity, and bloodlines too cursed to speak of. A book bound in grafting of human flesh and secured with animal bone kept Hannibal perturbed for almost a year.

Within the book, he deciphered ancient texts of clans he'd only been warned of when he was a childe himself. He heard the stories of bloodlines like the proud *Lasombra*, the cruel *Tzimisce*, and all-knowing *Salubri*, but never had he read writings on the dreadful *Nagaraja*. Their respective stories meant to frighten, or rather, discourage the most ignorant of vampires to abhor their existence, but Hannibal couldn't be frightened by boogeyman tales. Much to his sire's disapproval, Hannibal could have not been any more interested in hearing of such clans.

On further reading of the scandalous text, he delved deeper into the background of the *Nagaraja*. He was fascinated with their culture as they were *flesh-eaters*, cruel and predatory in their ways, and a clan still shrouded in mysticism. They were not bound by the laws of Kindred, but rather, they were independent and practiced self-exile. Hannibal, as much as he was annoyed with other vampires, couldn't imagine himself being solitary, let alone willingly.

The book described that their hunger for flesh was ravenous. The flesh, however, was not detailed as much of the book was ruined from the ravages of time. The paper, as thin as flayed skin, held only remnants of inked letters, but far too illegible. The Prince assumed that to nourish the *Nagaraja*, it was the flesh of *kine* that sated their hunger – as for all kindred, the blood of kine was the only sustenance. Hannibal was slightly taken back at the *Nagaraja's* ability to consume flesh as easily as he could consume blood – their physicality allowed them to do so.

His interest remained.

The Prince didn't share his knowledge with not a soul, not even his sire, as the text was considered *propaganda*. The Camarilla, with its many flaws and nuances, viewed such texts as heretical. As with anything regarding their folklore or creation, the Camarilla had never been fond of anything that challenged their utmost authority over vampire-kind. Sacred text, abolished, whilst artifacts of the old world were locked far beyond even Hannibal's reach.

In his elevated position, he was protected partially into viewing forbidden tomes, as he had no other to answer to, but he wasn't careless in his studies. He commissioned for a secret, well-disguised hidey-hole behind his library shelves. Equipped with the hardest security, sometimes Hannibal had trouble getting behind its gilded entrance, but it ensured that his most heinous of readings were kept from prying eyes.

His studied continued at a snail's pace with a reading here and there, but he was diligent in keeping notes and citations. The *Nagaraja* were dreadful, delightfully so, as the tomes Hannibal recovered further elaborated that the flesh that partook was *kine* only. A relief as the

Prince couldn't imagine what vampires tasted like, or the lack thereof. Gradually, Hannibal experimented with what he could – as the *Nagaraja* were gone, and he couldn't indulge his knowledge with any scholar.

Hannibal started his search for flesh from the back-alleys of Baltimore to the upper scions of high society. He gathered humans regardless of their age, race, and physicality, but he soon wheedled out the undesirables. It was all a façade, Hannibal could smooth-talk his way into the arms of would-be-lovers, or intimidate the weakest of minds. Nevertheless, he procured an endless supply of flesh he committed to experimenting with.

As lucrative as procuring the stock became, the Prince was very keen on refining his hypothesis. He prepared, cooked, and eventually ate every part of the human body till he couldn't bear to vomit anymore. Even with his repeatable failures, Hannibal logged every detail, including consistency, the freshness of the flesh, and the overall preparation. However, it was becoming rather tedious to waste his time repeating his mistakes.

Instead, he commissioned the best culinary minds in the world to make him a feast — unbeknownst to them what sort of flesh they seared, marinated, and served to their commissioner. Hannibal was to be the only guest to the upcoming feast, which in turn, casted suspicion his way, but the chefs did what they were paid to do. The night was right; never had a night been as perfect as the one in question. Hannibal dressed in his finest suit and had the table decorated with the best polished china and silverware. With the courses prepped and warm in front of him, the first morsel of flesh slipped past his lips. The result, much to Hannibal's disappointment, was what he expected – him violently retching the morsel into his handkerchief.

It ruined the night, of course, as Hannibal didn't want to partake in anymore of the food. He had his chefs take away the food, preferably out of his penthouse, to wherever they chose to dispose of it. Again, the suspicion rose till Hannibal was sure that the chefs knew he was nothing but a human being. Cultures around the world had their definitions of vampires, but nevertheless, the die had been cast. To render the suspicions nonexistent, Hannibal single-handedly executed the chefs in quick succession. He drained their bodies to leave them hapless, even from beyond the grave, as he didn't need no would-be necromancers savaging secrets from dead men's lips. The Prince was immortal, but he wasn't invincible.

Future dinner plans squandered; Hannibal was beyond frustrated. He returned to the tomes to read over the pages, word-by-word, till his eyes grew strained and raw from the continuous use. He'd grown depressed, madly so, and he couldn't face the waking night without berating himself into misery. His colleagues, or the ones who thought of themselves as his colleagues, had taken notice of his plight and he was gifted with many babbles – not limited to cars, new attire, or pious virgin vintages. However, Hannibal could no longer bear the agony of his failures. He'd never expected he missed *eating*, as he had been immortal for so long that hunger didn't exist anymore, but he was so envious of the *Nagaraja*. He couldn't accept his failures, not after studying them for so long.

Seeing his condition worsen, an associate had gifted the Prince their own *neonate* in hopes of brightening his mood — a young Ventrue who had an aptitude for politics and good conversation. She was sireless, much like Will Graham, but only after spending most of her

nocturnal life under the guidance and security of her Camarilla chaperons. Her sire, Hannibal didn't know much of the logistics, had fallen out of grace with the Camarilla and as penance, offered herself up for the stake to spare her childe the disgrace. Commendable, but Hannibal couldn't ever end his life to save the face of his childer, no matter how much he prized them.

The neonate was friendly, when she needed to be, and overall favorable company. She was to be her own Prince, in due time, when her Camarilla education was enough. Hannibal was going to be an instrument in her upbringing, as apparently, they had much more in common, yet Hannibal saw too much of himself in the neonate and it was befuddling.

He practically ignored her existence unless he needed his office tidied. A dignified maid, really, as Hannibal hardly made effort to socialize with the childe.

For several months the neonate, formally named *Florence*, if Hannibal's memory could recall, attended gatherings, receptions, and curated shows around Baltimore with Hannibal overlooking her shadow. At first, he was annoyed as he couldn't be bothered to grab the neonate's coat tail whenever she misspoke, but eventually it became second nature to haunt her movements.

She spoke clearly and gregariously, never once offensive to ignorant ears, and she was well-received by everyone around her. She dressed sharp, but her intellect was sharper. She was far more educated than what Hannibal was led to believe – in fact, there wasn't much he had to teach the neonate.

Florence recalled histories far beyond her nights even much so when she spoke privately to Hannibal. She recited long-dead poets as if she were reading the nightly news. Her sonnets were pleasant to the ear. Her interest for history entertained and beguiled Hannibal. Many a vampire was impressed, especially Camarilla associates, but behind Florence's gift of gab was still a childe maneuvering her way through a cynical world.

The Prince warned the young Ventrue of the snakes in the garden, himself included, and to be self-aware of herself. The Camarilla was an unforgiving, often cutthroat to both neonates and full-fledged vampires. Florence respected the Prince of Baltimore's advice much to her own ability, but nevertheless, she made herself known to friends and enemies alike.

It was like watching his younger self indulge in politics and conversation, both mutually exclusive, and it gave him security knowing the next generation of Ventrues weren't entirely doomed. In hindsight, Florence became his only friend rather than a neonate abandoned on his doorstep.

He was able to share his thoughts, the musings of the night, and even the few skeletons in his closet. In return, Florence sworn herself to secrecy at the price of Hannibal's friendship. He accepted, but never did he mention his forbidden readings tucked away in his office. She never suspected, or did she question what Hannibal didn't disclose to her.

Vampires, respectfully, were prideful and conniving, but Florence made it clear to Hannibal she still knew of manners. Hannibal liked that in his granted neonate and together, they spent many a night talking and theorizing the unknown and heretical.

Yet, it was short-lived as the Camarilla called upon the neonate for nights upon end till, in the shortest of words, Florence was merely a stranger in a mirage. Hannibal loathed the Camarilla's relocation of the dear neonate as she lifted him from his depressive episodes, but nevertheless, he returned to normalcy. He attended his gatherings, conducted diplomacy, and oversaw justice within the city. Yet, it wasn't till many months later did Florence reappear.

She was different, much so, as her Camarilla education was completed, and she was the perfect sycophant. She spoke lowly of histories, the arts, everything else pleasantly entertaining in this world. The only philosophies that she spoke of was of the Camarilla, and Hannibal had heard that shtick far more than what he would've liked. Of course, she kept pleasantries with the Prince – going further to continue referring to him as her 'friend', but Hannibal was annoyed with how easily she became a fanatic.

One night that Hannibal couldn't seem to etch from his memory involved himself and Florence – a heated clash of ideologies and principles. The grounds of the argument based on baseless assumptions and disregard for better opinions. The Prince had been in a foul mood that night; his nightly reading turned into another dead-end. Florence, elevated to the position of a *judicator*, was on a driven quest to wheedle the insubordinate and skeptical within the flourishing ranks of the Camarilla. Hannibal propositioned her to cast her eyes elsewhere as his court, like all vampires in Baltimore, carried themselves with dignity and didn't overstep their boundaries.

However, the neonate-turned-judicator was *sure* that the Prince wasn't loyal to their Camarilla overlords. He allowed the accusation to breathe life, but never once did he claim it's untruthfulness. She was partially right; Hannibal cared little of the festering husk the Camarilla became since he was bestowed his princely title. The night in question, Florence came into the Prince's *elysium* in hopes of getting a confession, no matter if it was true or fabricated, and Hannibal, against his baser instincts couldn't take her prodding anymore.

The Prince allowed Florence to investigate his library of forbidden knowledge – going as far to point out tomes, scrolls, and articles of heretical text. He had nothing to hide other than his thirst for knowledge beyond the realms of what the conservative Camarilla considered proper. After all, he was merely hoarding such dangerous, blasphemous texts the masses. Florence ate up the distraction as she was finetuned into cataloging every inked page in front of her. Had she remained her authentic self, Hannibal would've shared more, but alas she was more of a pawn carrying her sacred orders to scourge.

He waited for the neonate to fully distract herself with the many marvels within the troves of books, before he slid behind her with a silver blade tucked in his sleeve. The blade burned his skin, but it severed the flesh of the neonate's neck. Surprised, she floundered onto the floor with her blood staining the bookcases in rouge. The silver prevented her from healing the grievous wound, but it did not kill her. She clutched her throat as she tried to crawl away from the Prince, who, allowed her the false sense that she would escape *alive*.

He was over her with the blade sinking it's terrible maw into her back and a strangled cry left her lips. He turned her over to see her pleading eyes, but he didn't feel empathy. He thought of her as an equal, someone who couldn't be orchestrated into the Camarilla's brainwashing, but he was misled, and she was just another neonate – not even his neonate by *blood*, rather a

stranger in his domain. Hannibal didn't give her the finishing blow, rather, he bent down to caress her small face. She was confused, frightened even, as she couldn't predict whether Hannibal was going to kill her, or kiss her. The latter as his tongue skidded across her cheek – the irony, organic mixture of blood and tears tantalizing on the tip of his tongue. The neonate was beyond hysterical as the blood-loss made her immobile and her throat too severed to form words.

Hannibal, on the other hand, was guided by his temptation as the licks became sips then mouthfuls. The blood that seeped from the open throat under him was metallic, but as smooth as the blood he drained from wrists and arteries. He took it further by consuming flesh between his swallows – half-expecting it to rot before he could swallow it, but it went down as smoothly as the neonate's blood. It was a revelation to the Prince as he consumed her till the trauma, blood-loss, and savagery triggered Florence's true, final death.

Her hot, orange ashes burned an outline into the carpet which promptly convinced him to invest in marbled floors. He wiped the mess around his mouth and made quick work of vacuuming and shampooing much of the ashes out of his ruined carpet. The following night, he commissioned for all the carpet within his penthouse to be torn up and replaced with sparkly white marble. By the time the carpenters redid the floors, there was not a single trace that Florence ever existed or met her demise within the office.

It didn't take long for someone to notice her disappearance – rather, the associate who granted Hannibal the *displeasure* of her guardianship was the first to harp about her whereabouts. The name was something Hannibal didn't recall, but her guardian was a portly vampire with origins from the European courts of the Camarilla. Hannibal answered questions of the neonate's disappearance, but simply connived the lie that she ran off – much to her guardian's horror and surprise. Neonates tended to not abide by their elders and Florence was no different. She was a judicator no doubt, but Hannibal kept the lie that her work took her elsewhere. However, her guardian seemed to not be satisfied, going to the extent to campaign for her return. Eventually, Hannibal disposed of the guardian before his erratic search of his missing neonate alerted other vampires to cast their eyes his way.

He had prepared that vampire into a tartare, the same kind of tartare Hannibal ate alone at his dinner table. He did not regret killing Florence or her guardian, but he did miss the companionship. He looked over to the moon kissing over a bed of clouds in the night sky overlooking Baltimore. The sins of his past were nothing more but chapters he reread like a sad fairytale. Dinner suddenly became a turn-off to him, and he pushed his plate away from him. The savory taste of tartare became dull and unappealing that quickly. His vintage was too cool for him to enjoy and he was left to listen to the bel canto haunting his penthouse.

He longed for that companionship once again. Bedelia, as whimsical she had once been, could not fulfill the void he kept in his core. She didn't understand him, not like Florence did, and certainly not as a vampire. Although, he did drift to the idea of Will Graham – the fledgling, with all his concealed attributes, as a potential companion for their walk of immortality. Much of Will Graham had to be discovered, which, Hannibal would like to do as it would give him purpose to discover. He'd been coarse with the fledgling since his embrace; murdering his sire, terrifying him into submission. However, the night was anew, and Hannibal wished to amend his brutality towards the fledgling.

He called for Jack to bring his iPad from his office. The dutiful guard did as such and presented the slim tablet to his Prince. Hannibal began to type away with the recipient of his composed email to be Will, although he doubted the fledgling would answer promptly. It did give him a swell of anticipation to have Will sit across from him at the dinner table, savoring flesh and blood, and conversing to Hannibal about all things about the world. He gave the iPad back to Jack who returned it to his office.

Hannibal sat at his dinner table for moments more as lingering smile remained. He would have to clear his dining table, change out the decaying flowers, and return everything to normalcy but in the meantime – he had pleasant thoughts of the fledgling back within his presence. Oh, how he would dress Will in the very best, pamper him, show him the finer things an immortal's life could consist of. Will would appreciate his generosity, surely, as was just as lonely as Hannibal in a cruel, unforgiving world they lived in. The Prince would wait patiently, as he has done so for centuries, if it meant he would find true companionship again.

For a thousand nights, Hannibal could wait for Will Graham if it meant one night with him.

Lover Boy

Chapter Summary

Alana flees from home while Bedelia is given a reality check.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for implied/referenced abuse. Please continue with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XV

"Lover Boy"

She was terrified — rightfully so, as she had a thousand and more reasons to be frightened by her older sister. Alana, as much as she could admit, thought her sister Bella was the scariest person in all of Baltimore. In fact – she *was* the scariest person in Baltimore. She's seen her kill her friends and enemies alike and possibly had no qualms on killing Alana either.

Bella would've never admitted it either, but she had no use for Alana. As hurtful as it was to think about, Alana truly had no purpose and if it wasn't for the bloodline they shared – she would've been staked many years ago.

Alana thought about running away more than once, but she was drawn back to *The Insanitarium* like a moth to a blinding flame. She knew nothing but the club scene — the alcohol, drugs, and sex was her coping mechanism. She liked the patrons as much as they liked her. She brought them into her bed with a promise of drugs and sex, only to drain them and wring them up to dry. It was the easiest kind of hunting a vampire could indulge in.

However, Bella petrified her. Over the years, her sister had become infatuated with the idea of becoming a Baron, and once she became one, she aspired to be a *Prince*. Her sister was always the best when it came to talking, in fact, it was one of her best virtues. On the other hand, Alana was lonesome and stood as far away from the spotlight that came with a career of politics. They were opposites to one another – respectively.

Alana wanted to distance herself much from Bella, but she couldn't sever the tie that bonded together. Bella was cruel, calculating, and sometimes outright vicious but Alana loved her all

the same. A sick, gut-wrenching sort of pain only the Baroness could give to curb Alana's ever-growing loneliness.

After all, Bella was her *sire* – she couldn't simply *leave* without it hurting like hell. She never thought she would be alive, let alone a vampire, as when Bella found her; Alana was far beyond saving. She loitered and whored herself ragged till Bella found her strung out in an alleyway not too far from *The Insanitarium.* Baltimore was a far different city, but the pain was all the same. Death was a welcomed solace, but Bella robbed of her the inevitable release in favor of a lonesome eternity. Alana hated Bella for *years* after she was embraced as she wanted nothing more than to be relieved from her dreary existence.

Yet here she was – smoking cheap cigarettes outside her oh-so-favorite American diner. She escaped to the diner as it was her only paradise-on-earth as Bella, with her presumptuousness, could not stand venues like the diner. Her sister preferred the posh, overly expensive ambiance of five-star lounges. A stark contrast to *The Insanitarium* as the nightclub was nothing but that.

The diner – *The Bay View*, had strong coffee and the escape Alana needed. Here, no one would bother her and likewise she wouldn't bother anyone else. Bella wouldn't come here or send her goons after Alana as long as she stayed within *The Bay View*. In a way, the diner was her *elysium* as it was safer than anywhere else in Baltimore. The waitress came by; an overweight, middle-aged woman with a pleasant smile, and offered Alana another cup of coffee but the vampire declined. She only wanted to stare out to Baltimore's lonesome streets with her cigarettes as her solace. The other patrons scattered amongst the diner had the same sentiment as they kept their eyes lowered and voices hushed. That's what Baltimore did to people around here – to leave them to wallow in self-pity.

Alana didn't pity herself, but she pitied her misery. Of all the places to be trapped in, Baltimore was the last place she ever wanted to be. If the hunkered down, depressed patrons weren't proof enough – Baltimore was simply a miserable place.

Rather than dwell on her circumstances, her thoughts did wander to *Will Graham* as he was a beautiful, ethereal nymph of a man. He was introverted, expected as had the worst of things befall upon him, yet Alana still could feel the warmness clinging underneath his clothes. He smelled *alive* – something Alana had dreadfully wished she could smell like again. He hadn't been hardened by Baltimore's cruelty as that boyish face still held an innocent longevity to it. She came off awfully strong as he was flustered by her suave charm, but she didn't expect him to run either.

She extinguished her cigarette on a nearby saucer as she chuckled under her breath. She knew more of Will than what he knew about himself; the bloodline they shared. She knew a Malkavian better than anyone else as her well-guarded secret, a secret not even *Bella* mentioned – they both were of *Malkavian* stock. Whereas Bella's madness was diluted underneath her façade, Alana reveled in her mania. It allowed her to party for nights upon end as nothing inhibited her. However, Will wasn't the free-spirited, hedonist Alana's Malkavianism blessed her with. Time would tell what kind of vampire Will was going to be, but in the meantime, Alana would sing her siren's call.

After all, she needed a *new* lover boy.

Will had never been a gentle sleeper as periodically throughout his sleep – he had pillows haphazardly strewn across the room. His clothes hung to him like soiled curtains as a thin sheet of sweat had bubbled up from his pores. He rolled over in a fit only to land off the couch and onto the hard, tiled floor.

Thump.

The fledgling laid on the floor for agonizing moments before he could pick himself up. The clock had turned into a new night as he'd slept through much of the day. His joints burned in overexertion as well as the bruises flowering up and down his frame.

He hardly acknowledged it as he dragged himself into the bathroom. He ran the sink's faucet and covered his hands in the icy torrent. The cold water splashed against his face didn't wake him up as much as he expected, but it made the healing abrasions sting. His reflection was still the same apart from his growing curls unwinding themselves. He grimaced and got into the shower. The equally cold spray made his body sting, but it was the feeling that reassured him he wasn't turning into a *monster*.

He redressed into a fresh pair of clothes and satisfied his thirst in the kitchen. The nearby nightly broadcast broke a story about the explosions and inevitable fires from two nights prior – the same explosions Brian had asked him about. As far as the newscaster announced, the cause was because of faulty wiring rather than an act of arson. Will knew elsewise as the Brujah had insinuated that he was involved. Will didn't have a single care about the explosions, really, as he had no part to play in their detonation. However, he did worry because of Brian's affiliation with the Anarchs and they were at odds with Hannibal.

He couldn't lose Brian – not the only friend he had in this accursed city.

Will sat back down on the couch and picked up the remote. He flipped through the channels as his ears alerted him to the door opening behind him. He quipped his head around to see the door open and a smile ran from ear to ear. The Brujah stepped into the apartment with his battered leather coat draped around his shoulders and a cigarette between his curved lips. He was even more startled to have Will staring at him wide-eyed and excited.

"Thank God you're here.", the Brujah sounded relieved, almost thankful as he squeezed the fledgling into an embrace. "I was so fucking worried about you."

Will could only smile as there was warmness pooling into his stomach. He was relieved to have his favored friend back within an arm's reach and he simply couldn't care less if the Brujah was displeased at him for not listening. Rather, Will was in bliss.

"Welcome back, Brian.", Will replied, his face glowing. "You could say I was getting homesick."

The Brujah scoffed as he threw his jacket onto the island counter and went straight for the refrigerator. The fledgling watched him for a few moments and the Brujah came to the other side of the couch with a blood bag in hand. His cigarette hung dangerously low with an

anchor of ash weighing it down. Will instinctively picked up the ashtray off the coffee table and offered it to the Anarch. Brian accepted it and discarded the cigarette.

“Look, I wanted you to stay there for good reasons—“, the Brujah scolded. “It’s not safe for you *Malks* or any vampire at the moment.”

Will laughed and tucked his legs underneath himself. Brian cocked up his eyebrow as the fledgling could only stifle his laughter.

“You don’t need to tell us thrice, Brian.”, the fledgling replied, pointing out the yellowing bruise on his cheekbone.

The Brujah leaned in closer to examine the fledgling’s face and his own face soured into concern. He lifted the fledgling’s chin with a finger and Will looked at him underneath a canopy of eyelashes. There was something oddly intimate having Brian study him like this, but he reluctantly kept his gaze from lingering too long underneath the Brujah’s watchful eye. The Anarch sucked in his teeth and left Will alone.

“Where did you get these marks?”, Brian interrogated. “Or should I be asking if they’re still alive, *little killer*?”

Will hesitated. Hiding the truth from the Brujah wouldn’t work either because knowing him, he would fight every vampire in Baltimore if it meant getting the one who attacked Will.

The fledgling sighed.

“There was a gas station not too far from the Baroness…”, he began, carefully curating his words to not entice the Brujah into anger. “They already knew of me, Brian, and they wanted to kill me so *bad*.”

Brian’s expression softened as he cusped the back of Will’s head, bringing the fledgling close, and laying a soft kiss to his forehead. The fledgling held onto the Brujah’s wrist.

“Kid, you can’t just be out in the open – not in this fucking city.”, the Brujah began to explain. “There’s vampires here that’ll open your guts on a whim.”

Will nodded and dipped his head lower in Brian’s grasp.

“When I needed you the most—“, Will could feel tears begin to bubble in his eyes. “You weren’t *there*, Brian.”

“Don’t do this to me, kid.”, the Brujah said, combing curls away from Will’s face. “I nearly went mad trying to find you.”

“I told you I didn’t *trust* her.”, the younger vampire argued. “She’s strange.”

“Yeah, you don’t have to tell me twice.”, Brian kicked his feet up onto the coffee table. “Strange would be the *last* thing I’d call her.”

The fledgling chuckled and rested his head against the Anarch's shoulder. The Brujah felt comforting, almost like a bed of feathers as he seemed to take away all of Will's anxiety. The Brujah gave Will a good back pat before letting him go. He composed himself and Will could see his eyes were blotchy with red tears. The Brujah wouldn't admit it, his ego wouldn't let him, but he had a heart underneath the leather and tattoos.

"Next time, at least try to find me.", the Brujah lectured. "We have friends all over this part of the city."

Will sighed. He wasn't in much danger – he was still alive, his limbs weren't missing, and he still had teeth in his mouth. Before he was a vampire, he had much more to fear in Baltimore's shadowy corners rather than convenience store thugs. He feared clients that would beat him mercilessly, or take advantage of him, but the worst fear of all was not getting his fix of the night. As a vampire, he only feared himself because there was still powers he hadn't learned how to control.

"I promise.", the fledgling said. "But you should pick better friends."

Brian was relieved and Will was in the clear. The fledgling watched as the Brujah sat down on the disheveled couch and lit a cigarette. He thought of Alana, her soft body against his own, and he suddenly grew flustered. He distracted himself by joining the Brujah on the couch who was aimlessly flipping through the television channels. The harsh aroma of the cigarette got choked up in Will's throat and he shielded his nose away with the sleeve of his shirt. The Brujah noticed and extinguished the cigarette.

"I found the twisted transistor yesternight.", Will confessed, becoming entranced with the television screen. "They aren't twins."

The Anarch looked at the fledgling with puzzled eyes.

"You really saw Alana, kid?", the Brujah questioned further. "You haven't told the Baroness, right?"

"She was in the club, yes – well, if my mind isn't playing tricks on me. She was very friendly now that I think about it.", Will pressed his nails into his palms as the seductive images of Alana in her shortened skirt passed through his memory. The warm flush he felt before began to creep up his neck and he averted his attention towards the television.

"I found the Nosferatu's ghoul. Weird creature…", Will frowned when he remembered Knox Harrington, that skittish buffoon. "Crazier than what I see in my pea soup."

"Did the ghoul know where his master sleeps?"

"No, and he seemed too scared to talk riddles with me."

"Anything else happen?"

"She didn't follow me – Alana. The Baroness didn't know she was there either. She was hiding rabbits in her hat.", Will rambled on. "Dead rabbits."

The Brujah scoffed and looked to Will with wide eyes. The fledgling wasn't lying, he had no reason to, but he didn't want to converse deeper on Alana as there was still some unsorted feelings from that encounter. The longer Brian stared at him, the more flustered he got as the room suddenly felt hot. He excused himself to the kitchen to get some cold water, but the Brujah was unrelentless in his occupied stare.

"There's something you aren't telling me, kid.", the Brujah suggested, acutely aware that Will was squeamish. "Something else happened too?"

The cat was out of the bag and Will felt his whole face reddened. The cold water he splashed on his face did the adverse effect and made him even more flushed. He looked over his shoulder to see the Brujah grinning from ear to ear.

"No, don't even think about it.", the fledgling defended himself. "We just talked."

"I wouldn't blame you if you did.", Brian suggested. "But she's a kind of crazy I don't need."

"She called me a liar.", Will complained. "A liar with his pants on fire."

"Well, are you?", the Anarch flicked his lighter to ignite another cigarette. "I mean, aren't we all liars?"

"I'm not a comfortable liar.", Will crossed his arms. "Yet her sister is a master of lies."

"Definitely so, and we aren't going to be associating with the Baroness anymore."

The fledgling arched his eyebrow. He was glad the Brujah had come to his senses. The Baroness was no friend, or a lover, hell, not even an acquaintance. She was just as nasty as the Prince but prettier. He could sense the Brujah's growing animosity. Will was relieved as the nightclub gave him the heebie-jeebies.

"She wasn't who she said she was, right?", Will suggested. "She played you and your friends since the beginning."

The Anarch looked back at Will with a bit of surprise. The fledgling shrugged his shoulders and turned his back away from the Brujah. He knew the moment they met the Baroness she was a player, a con, and most definitely not their friend. He could sense it in the way she moved, how she knew exactly what to say to sweeten her schemes, and he even knew that inside, she was foul and unforgiving. With the power and wealth she flaunted herself with, the Baroness was a lonely, envious woman with malicious intentions. Had she had the opportunity – he was sure the Baroness would rat the both of them to the Prince.

"Well look at you, *telepath*. What else do you know?", the Brujah jested. "Do you know what underwear I'm wearing?"

"You aren't wearing underwear, Brian.", Will responded flatly. "You never do."

"Oh, aren't you a little pervert?", the older vampire was cheesing at Will's observation. "Have you been looking at my ass lately?"

Will groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. He wasn't in the slightest bit interested in the Brujah's relatively flat behind or did he *think* about looking at his behind.

"We're being serious, Brian."

The Brujah shrugged. He obviously saw the growing frustration on Will's face and he stopped his joking short.

"Alright, then shoot. Tell me what's on your mind."

Will swallowed. He thought about the bloodied man, or demon, or whatever foulness his mind had envisioned the night he stayed at the Prince's penthouse. He was never a vivid dreamer unless he stayed up too late watching horror movies, but the dream was far more real than anything he ever dreamt before. It left goosebumps prickling up his arms and he chewed on his bottom lip. He would describe it to Brian, if the Anarch would listen, and in the best-case scenario tell him either he was going mad or he still suffered the lingering effects of being hypnotized.

"If I tell you something, you won't think I'm crazy?", the fledgling asked. "Please don't call me crazy."

"Kid, you're a Malkavian.", the Brujah said, inhaling his cigarette as the ash curled. "What's *not* crazy about you?"

As brutally painful it was to hear, Brian was brutally honest. His vampiric affliction meant he was prone to bouts of madness, but he wasn't crazy. He refused to be called 'crazy', not when there's vampires, ghouls, and other monsters running amok. Unpopular as it was, he still had his sanity on a good leash. The last time he was called crazy, he was strapped into a chair and fed drugs till he couldn't remember how to count to five.

Will sucked in a breath and sighed.

"What do you know about a *gilded* box?", asked Will. "Or any box that holds something *really* bad inside?"

The Brujah had his full attention towards Will as the extinguished cigarette still dangling between his lips was quickly executed into a nearby ashtray. He rose fast enough for even Will to be startled as he was now hovering over the fledgling. Will swallowed the lump caught in his throat as the Brujah was staring not only into his eyes, but possibly farther into his soul.

"Don't open the box.", a whisper had teased the shell of Will's ear. "There's no jack inside!"

The Anarch looked worried, rightfully so, as cryptic as Will was, he knew something was seriously amiss.

"Do you know about the sarcophagus, Will?", Brian asked, the tone in his voice shifting lower. "Do you *know* what's inside of it?"

The fledgling shook his head. He had the slightest idea of what could be inside, but if the bloodied man in the bathroom didn't tell him otherwise – he assumed only the worst was inside that *gilded* box. The Brujah sucked in his teeth and went for his jacket. Will watched idly as the Brujah almost ripped open the refrigerator to grab a drink.

"Kid, I don't know if you know, but that *box* you're talking about is really fucking with us vampires around here.", he warned. "I know you Malkavians can sense things and if your head is screwed on right now, you know I'm not kidding when I say I'm fucking *terrified*."

Will was most definitely anxious at Brian's revelation. The Anarch was the bravest, if not the most headstrong man he'd ever met and for him to say he was scared about that box, Will could only be petrified. He fidgeted with his hands as the Brujah paced around the apartment. He exhaled and twisted his hands into his gelled hair, disheveling his slickened locks, and began to gnaw on his bottom lip. The anxiety that engulfed Brian was secondhand as Will's own anxiety began to skyrocket. He didn't know what to expect at this point.

Brian stopped his rabid pacing to compose himself. He practically sucked the littlest of drops out of the blood pouch crumpled in his hand. He looked over to the fledgling and contemplated his next move.

"Have you told anyone else about this?", he asked, seemingly cautious of the walls around them, as if they had their ears finetuned into their conversation.

The fledgling shook his head. He had not a single reason to tell anyone else, especially not the Prince, and he'd be stupid if he started to harp like a madman.

"No, I don't need my delusions talking back at me.", Will admitted. "They do enough as it is – wait, does that make me crazy?"

"You aren't crazy, I promise you.", the Brujah said, his tone softening. "You are the sanest person I've met."

It brought comfort to hear that from Brian. The Brujah made distance between them and he zipped up his jacket. He looked at the digital clock sitting on the island counter and made a grimaced face.

"Look, I need to run back to Matt and Freddie – are you going to be okay tonight, by yourself?", the Anarch asked. "I won't go if you don't feel safe."

"I'll be fine, Brian.", Will said. "I have a favor to ask you, though."

"Whatever you need, kid.", the Brujah beamed. "I'm all ears."

It had been bothering him for some time – his inability to control his abilities, or his natural strengths. Will thought about the shipyard a few nights ago. He made himself obscure to the security guard on a whim, or at least, not realizing it. He had vitality beyond capacity when fending himself off in the gas station. Powers and abilities he would've liked to be taught more in – Will hoped that the Brujah could mentor him. After all, he didn't have a *sire* to do so.

“When you return, will you teach me about powers?”, the fledgling asked. “If you can, of course.”

“Sure, *little killer*. Don’t be a crybaby when I knock your ass into the dirt, yeah?”

Will nodded and the Anarch beamed. The fledgling didn’t plan to go out, not since he almost got himself pummeled into mash, and he wasn’t in the mood for haunting Baltimore. He did, however, give Brian a farewell embrace which by all means, was returned with thrice the amount of affection. If Will had breath left in his chest, Brian surely squeezed it out. The Anarch stepped out the apart and Will watched from the doorway. Before the older vampire could leave, Will stooped down and pulled the welcome-mat back. Underneath, a key laid on the floor. He handed it to the Anarch.

“Thanks, needed one of these.”, the Anarch said, his cheeky smile glittering with his canines.

“It was just a hunch.”, Will didn’t expect a key to be under the rug, but it was just a coincidence.

“Before I go.”, the Brujah said in the doorway. “I should tell you where I haunt.”

Will raised an eyebrow. He’d assume that Brian haunted anywhere as he had a familiarity with Baltimore the fledgling yet to acquire.

“If you ever need me, go to *The Last Call*.”, the Anarch told him. “It’s our shithole of a bar on the other side of town – but, it’s home. You’ll always have a place with us.”

“Just look for this.”, the Brujah rolled up his sleeve to point at his tattoo; a large, roughly tattooed ‘A’.

Will made a mental note.

“Who’s us?”, the fledgling asked back. “I live with too many voices, and they don’t like company.”

Brian chuckled, pulled his sleeve down, and stepped out the doorway.

“Oh just a little rag-tag team of would-be shit-starters.”, he gleefully said. “Y’know, the usual.”

Will folded his arms. He hadn’t met the rest of the Anarchs since the night of his would-be execution, but if Brian was vouching *The Last Call* as a safe place, then he trusted him.

“I’ll haunt you later, Will. Remember what I said.”, the Anarch chastised. “Don’t forget the sign.”

The Brujah tucked the key into his pocket and gave Will one last pat to his shoulder before turning on his heels. The fledgling watched the Anarch go down the hallway and down the stairs. He closed the door softly and sighed. At least the Anarch had a key to let himself back in.

Will decided that he was going back to sleep. He welcomed the couch and plopped down. He kicked his feet up onto the arm and grabbed the remote. He clicked the current channel over to the nightly broadcast.

It was an apparent recap from earlier in the night, but Will was attentive at the coverage. The broadcast showed a large, immaculately decorated ship docked at a lit-up harbor with police officers and reporters surrounding it. The reporters were frantically trying to get the officers who remained stalwart at their post. The nightly reporter relayed the story:

“In other news, the Elizabeth Dane has been docked indefinitely at the Bethlehem-Fairfield shipyard. With the crew aboard, slain by an unknown assailant, taken to the local morgue for identification – Baltimore P.D. has made it evidently clear that no persons shall trespass aboard the ship. Tight security is present in and out of the ship. Furthermore, the contents within the ship was scarce except for an unknown box – a *sarcophagus*, said police officials…”

Will sat upright and he felt his heart sink in his chest. The familiar goosebumps prickled his skin and his hairs stood at full attention. The next scene shown was of the *gilded* box, golden, beautiful even as it was decorated with intricate carvings. It was insanely big, looking to have the ability to hold several bodies inside, but Will got the shivers the longer he stared at the box. He quickly found the remote and changed the channel. He sat for a few moments holding his would-be breath as he couldn’t trust himself to exhale. It felt like spiders were crawling over him as the couch suddenly became too insufferable to lay on. He got up and paced towards the kitchen but was alarmed by the ‘*ping*’ of the computer nearby.

He went to his computer and saw an email waiting in his inbox. Will grimaced and reluctantly opened the email. His eyes scanned the text of the email:

To: <wg@email.com> Sent on Monday at 8:40 P.M.
From: <unknown.sender@email.com>

Subject: Dear William

Dear William,

I’d like to cordially invite you to dinner within these next few nights. Whenever you are available, I implore you to visit me at my tower. Do you remember how to get there? Of course you do, William. If needed, I can send a ride for you. Should you accept my invitation, I will be grateful to have you.

With warmest regards,

Your Prince,

Hannibal Lecter

The email left prangs of nausea slushing around in Will's gut as he couldn't stomach the tone of the email – let alone Hannibal giving his supposed *'warm regards'* should Will visit him again. He didn't want to return to the Prince's tower to be hypnotized, let alone dinner and a conversation. The Prince, in the least of words, unsettled Will. He was charming but terrifying at the same time. He could honey his threats while smiling and making conversation. Much to Will's disgust with himself – he found the Prince *oddly* attractive, in a not-so-sociopathic way. Hannibal kept a mysterious, untouchable aura amongst him, but it was attractive. Whether Will felt himself being pulled along, he couldn't say but Hannibal knew how to woo people.

Still, Will wanted to strangle him. He didn't want to conversate over wine and dinner. Nevertheless, if Will didn't respond, Hannibal would most likely show up at the door, or worse, send his gigantic bodyguard with the sword. Will leaned over the keyboard and typed his response, frowning as he did, but he wouldn't have to expect unwelcomed visitors. His shoulder ached as he typed; a reminder of his healing wounds.

He turned away from the computer to lay back on the couch. He closed his eyes and clasped his hands in his lap. He was drifting to sleep – a dreamless slumber, as Baltimore groaned and moaned outside. The night would turn younger, but Will was going to sleep his hurt and bruises away.

The penthouse was quiet, except for Bedelia's entrance, but oddly quiet. Bedelia peeled out of her fur coat and rested it against the bar counter. She looked around to find the dinner table immaculately decorated, but not a single dish on the table. She pressed her lips together and took notice of the lingering smell of cooked food wafting in the air.

Hannibal had no need for food, or even wine, which led Bedelia to be skeptical that he was alone tonight. Respectfully, she harbored no malice to whomever Hannibal invited, as the penthouse wasn't mutually owned between them, but she was curious to he had over. In particular, she would be soured had Hannibal invited the fledgling; Will Graham. She didn't wish to impede or overstep into Hannibal's relationships, whether personal or political, and she was certain Will Graham was no threat to her relationship with Hannibal. Bedelia did wonder, for miniscule moments, if Hannibal held Will in the same regard to her.

She grimaced. She knew Hannibal; his flaws, imperfections, or the lack thereof. Bedelia knew he was quick to obsess, as he was prone to bouts of boredom, but his ill-fated obsessions led to episodes of moroseness. The deeper his fixation, the more he desired the muse of his obsession. Sure, she satisfied his appetite for conversation, or romantic rendezvouses, but she couldn't sate his curiosities. He discovered much about her than she did him – after all, he had many years to observe and theorize, while Bedelia's days were fated to end and decay. Whether or not Will was the Prince's next, ill-fated fixation, Bedelia would convince her retainer to look elsewhere.

After all, Will Graham was just a *childe*, not a person of note, or status, but the outcome of a terrible situation. Their initial meeting proved that; a wayward man with a warped sense of reality. Will could be dressed in the finest silks and fed the purest of vintages, but in fact, he could never be more than a tragedy. Then again, as Bedelia has known Hannibal for many

years, the Prince pitied the downtrodden. Like the semantics of life and all it entails, Hannibal, the lack of life he possessed, could only be infatuated when he couldn't have one anymore.

She wouldn't understand, not with her mortality, but Will Graham certainly wouldn't sate Hannibal's appetite for the foreign and curious, not for too long anyway. Eventually, Will would bore him, and the cycle would continue for as long as Hannibal walked the earth, he'd find boredom.

Bedelia took off her heels to walk deftly across the tiled floor. Even on her tippy toes, she was cautious to keep herself quiet. Hannibal had excellent hearing, as did all vampires, but Hannibal had exceptionally better hearing than most vampires. Her presence was always welcomed, as the Prince guaranteed her that he had no qualms in her entering his *elysium*, but he had a quirk with arriving unannounced. She only assumed that he didn't like to be snuck upon, but it was unbelievable to think she could possibly startle him. If any, Bedelia was a pleasant surprise, not an unexpected houseguest.

Bedelia crept up the stairs and towards Hannibal's bedroom. Much to her surprise and relief, she found him attentive towards his iPad. He was dressed down to just his dress shirt and bottoms, but he was far more beautiful than Bedelia had ever seen him. The moon's silvery gaze from the window gave him a shimmery look that only added to his etherealness. His lips were creased into a tight bow with his eyes trained in scouring the words on the screen. He looked up at her entrance into his bedroom and folded down his iPad.

She warmed up and graciously smiled towards the Prince. She approached him with open arms and the Prince stood – greeting her with an affectionate embrace. Bedelia smelled the cologne wafting off his skin as it was a swirling mixture of cinnamon, oak, and vanilla. She felt the tantalizing tickle of his fangs against the crook of her neck and she nearly fell into the embrace. The Prince kept her anchored, his hands bracing on the small of her back, and she felt the stalwartness of his physique.

"You just missed dinner.", admitted Hannibal. "I thought you were elsewhere this evening."

She was supposed to be but, her human acquittances couldn't hold a dinner to save their lives. A familiar friend and his wife had invited her to their pitiful dinner, but it was painfully brutal to stay any longer as the meal was over-cooked and the wine terribly tart. Bedelia was kind, for the most part, but had to excuse herself from the debacle. Oddly enough, her friend's wife was displeased at her presence, which Bedelia noted as she was invited inside, and it was presumptuous to believe the dear wife spoiled dinner on purpose. In retrospect, she shouldn't have gone in the first place. She tutted under her breath and the Prince arched an eyebrow.

She curled her hand into Hannibal's gelled hair and massaged the back of his neck. The gesture earned her a purr of approval and the Prince leaned into it. His forehead rested in the crook of her slender neck. He inhaled her aroma as his olfactory senses cataloged the miasma of smells. In the beginning, Bedelia was slightly unnerved at the gesture, but she came to enjoy it as the littlest of ministrations sent her skin aflame.

“I was, my Prince, but alas – no one can live to your cooking expertise.”, Bedelia cooed, teasing her nails over Hannibal’s cool skin. “Or your lack of ulterior motive.”

Hannibal chuckled and brought his lips to her cheek, their coolness leaving a colder sting to her skin, and he loosened his embrace. Bedelia took it upon herself to sit upon the ottoman before his grand bed, studying him as the Prince averted his gaze back to the windowpanes. She could see it now – his thinking was elsewhere. She pressed her lips together into a tight scowl, but was careful to feint her disapproval as Hannibal had ways of knowing her emotional state.

He looked to her and his eyes narrowed – a veiled threat, as Hannibal didn’t need to explicitly warn Bedelia of her boundaries. Her expression lightened and refocused elsewhere, but the damage was done, and the Prince was aware of her discern.

“You’re offended.”, Hannibal suggests. “I take it you are discontent, in aspect of your friend’s unsavory dinner, or perhaps towards me?”

Bedelia scoffed under her breath as she crossed her legs. Hannibal was a mind reader, or at least, an expert of reading cues. He knew exactly what bothered her, but he teased her and dangled the carrot in hopes she would take a bite. It was an offense she committed more than enough times – repeatable, even, and he knew it worked without fail. This time, she didn’t give Hannibal the satisfaction that came with unraveling her concerns.

“Why would I be offended, Hannibal?”, she chirped as her voiced lifted into an airy tune. “I should ask have I offended *you*? After all, I missed your dinner.”

Dangerous, even for Bedelia as she was playing a game with dangerous prizes. She’d play coy and aloof, but she made a chip at the Prince’s pristine armor. Hannibal hid the smile curling at the corners of his lips and continued his gaze outward to Baltimore. There was a coldness wafting in the room, an unfamiliar sensation, and Bedelia felt the icy chill up and down her body.

Cruel. She mused taking in his fullness underneath the moonlight, noticing how the fine lines in his face became tightened. *Beautifully cruel*.

She rose to stand, gaining the attention of the Prince’s averted gaze, and she stood stalwart beneath his glare. She gauged Hannibal’s restraint in the matter, as she was certain he wouldn’t strike her, but he knew how to hurt her otherwise.

In a terrifying way, Hannibal couldn’t be deciphered in moments like these. His unnatural façade was refined down to the bare bones as he had more years than Bedelia to fine tune it. He was nothing but a predator in a human suit – as much as he’d disagree and that he was far evolved from the bestiality his kind was, but Bedelia knew he was just as feral. He could be visualizing the dozen or so ways he could kill her – or worse, but Bedelia would welcome a quick death rather than his drown-out cruelty.

However, the torment she expected didn’t come as the Prince laxed and gestured for her to join him at the window. She did as she was told and joined her companion at the windowpane. The city was but a visage – the darkening night clouds obscuring much of it

save for the few skyscrapers around them. His fine hand found rest at the small of her back as he looked down to her. Only a foot separated their height difference, but he towered over him with sheer vastness that left a part of Bedelia small. His eyes kept a tinge of bright red around them, further standing out in the dim light of the bedroom, and Bedelia felt the haunting pressure weigh on her.

“You won’t ever be replaced, my love.”, he says, his tone hushed and oddly comforting. “I wouldn’t dream of losing you.”

Bedelia was flattered, but not pleased. She was not to be replaced, or discarded, and to insinuate so was abrasive if not insulting. She was not a first wife to be slowly overtaken by a deceitful mistress – no, she was not to be placed in that situation. Adding salt to the wound would be that the fledgling would be her replacement, as if he could entertain Hannibal, let alone offer guidance and diplomacy. She politely smiled and turned to her companion.

“You’re *very* cruel, Hannibal.”, Bedelia confesses, pulling herself away from his impending reach. “You know exactly what you’re doing.”

“I can’t lie to you, can I, sweet Bedelia?”, he was mocking her, in the sickly cruel way he always did. “Are you worried that I’ll bore of you? Or I don’t *love* you?”

Bedelia stilled her tongue from lashing. As quick Hannibal was with his tirades, he was measuring her resolve, and most importantly, her fortitude. Her next words must be gauged as the wrong tone, or response, and Hannibal would sink his fangs deep into the discovered insecurity. He knew she was of a strong composure, not easily shaken, but he would chip away to reveal her soft, malleable core.

“I am not replaceable, as are you, and I don’t feel threatened in my position.”, Bedelia dutifully replied. “I’m content with how things are.”

Hannibal leered and Bedelia felt annoyance. She was never a liar, blunt, but never a liar. The Prince was not ignorant of her disapproval over Will Graham, but he enjoyed the way he toyed with her squeamishness over the complication that Will Graham was.

“He won’t be different than the others, Hannibal.”, admits Bedelia, accepting her would-be defeat. “You know this.”

“I’m simply intrigued about his pedigree, Bedelia.”, Hannibal smoothly lies, turning away from the windowpane and Bedelia.

He sauntered out the room and Bedelia followed. With the snap of his fingers, the penthouse was flushed with warm light and the chandelier above them glittered. There was distance between them as Bedelia took her seat on the elongated, curved sofa hugging the edges of the living room as Hannibal took position at the fireplace nearby. She crossed her lithe legs and looked away from Hannibal – not out of spite, but out of restraint. He was testing her, much more now as he laid bare his intentions, or the possible lack thereof with the fledgling.

“Intrigue or desire, Hannibal? They aren’t mutually exclusive to you.”, Bedelia quipped, seeing a tinge in Hannibal’s cool expression.

“What would you say if I told you I desired the fledgling?”, Hannibal stalked towards Bedelia with his eyes lidded downwards. He gave his fangs a salacious lick with the flick of his tongue. “Would you *cry*? Would you *yell* at me? Would you try to *kill* me?”

Bedelia was stone-faced. She didn’t know what to say, but Hannibal teetered her on the edge. She would do none of those things, but yet, she could feel her heart constrict. She loved Hannibal, yes, and would give anything if Hannibal asked, but she could not give him away to anyone – fledgling or not. The Prince ghosted his fangs down her neck, his breath gravely cold, and his fangs hovering closer to prick the skin. She sucked in a breath and waited. He didn’t bite her or laid a finger on her, instead, he disengaged and stood back from her.

“I have important matters to tend to tonight, Ms. Du Maurier.”, Hannibal said, eyeing the opening door across the penthouse. Bedelia heard the heavy stomps of his bodyguard, Jack, clunk towards them. She rose up to meet the lumbering statue of a man’s silent gaze and she curtly smiled. He was expressionless save his polite bow.

“I shouldn’t keep you from them.”, she acknowledged, walking to the bar counter for her coat.

She draped it around her shoulders and Jack offered his hand. She gladly took the bodyguard’s hand as he escorted her towards the door. She still felt Hannibal’s eyes peeling the flesh off her back as he watched her walk away. Bedelia threw a look back to see him already walking away towards his office.

“Good night, my Prince.”, her salutations fell on deaf ears as Hannibal was gone. Jack took her downstairs into the lobby, but she freed herself from his presence as she saw her driver waiting patiently in her parked vehicle.

It wasn’t until she was downstairs and back into her vehicle did she begin to cry. Her driver looked cautiously from the rear-view mirror but uttered not a word as he pulled the vehicle into the street. Bedelia cried into her lap as the tears rolled freely on her pinkish cheeks. Her heart pounded hard enough to make her blood ring in her ears. She thought of herself as a composed woman, not the hysterical shrike many of her gender was, but tonight revealed she was still a creature with emotion. Whereas Hannibal killed his emotions many years ago, she was still tied to her humanity and with humanity came feelings.

She harbored no malice against Hannibal, only towards his words and actions, and she loved him more than the entire world. For her, to have Hannibal swayed away by a lesser creature, Will Graham himself, was a worst fate – not even death could be so terrible. Her driver asked did she want to return home and through her tears, she told him to take her home. She needed respite, and possibly her entire liquor cabinet to drown her sorrows. She was never taught to properly cope with her feelings; a bane from her inattentive childhood. Liquor brought her solace, momentarily, and she wanted to be blissfully intoxicated if it meant she could shed Hannibal’s cruelness off her.

The waltz into her house was supported by her driver, a fair man named Anthony, and she was thankful for his presence. He got her into her vast, empty manse and into a warm bath. He was overly polite, obsessively so in his attempts to placate all her whims. Bedelia paid him well and he kept her needs in high regards. If she didn’t know any better, she’d say he

was infatuated with her. Though Anthony would never admit it, Bedelia knew the wants of mankind. As she watched the simmering bathwater swirl around in the tub, she made note of how Anthony waited with a hitched breath. She wouldn't tease the man callously. Tonight, however, she was in no state to acquire a lover, or a fling.

She dismissed him once she was satisfied with the water's temperature and he left. Bedelia stripped into nudity. The warm scented water caressed her aching physicality. Her breasts rose and descended with each, shuddering breath. The liquor burned her throat, but her tears were hotter.

The bath was short-lived as her skin pruned and wrinkled from the watery abode.

She redressed into her night clothes with her liquor as company. She was weary and emotionally drained. She'd give time between herself and Hannibal – not risking souring their relationship further. Her wounds needed to be licked and placated first before she thought of striking, respectively towards Will Graham, and she couldn't risk being unprepared. The fledgling was intelligent as well as cautious. Their first encounter taught her that. Until then, her solace laid within returning to normalcy and keeping appearances.

After all, she was very much in love with Hannibal. She would burn Baltimore to the ground if it meant she could waltz, drink, and be in his embrace forevermore.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the support.

Abnormality

Chapter Summary

Fed up with Bella's mistreatment, Alana finds out the whereabouts of Will Graham.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for implied abuse and violence. Please continue with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XVI

"Abnormality"

Alana snuck past Lou, the nightclub patrons, and presumably her sister as she tiptoed back into her bedroom. The loft was abnormally quiet, even by her standards, as most of the time the music downstairs could be heard upstairs. She couldn't hear anything coming from upstairs or Bella's office which meant the coast was relatively clear.

The only sound was of silence.

She stepped out of her heels; her feet burning from wearing them for so long. It was a mission to take off her jewelry as every piece clinked together as she unequipped them. She was quick to disrobe the rest of her outfit, but cautious not to make anymore noise as Bella was omnipotent, always around, but never close. She didn't even want to risk running a shower as she didn't want to alert her sister she was home.

After all, her sister practically threw her out once she learned she had relations with a *certain* Nosferatu. It was a fling, really, as Alana wasn't physically attracted to the mishappened Nosferatu. He was kind, for vampire standards, and liked to keep Alana talking, but not anyone she would consider a boyfriend. She couldn't remember his name either other than it was a funny sounding one. It probably wasn't his real name now that Alana thought about it.

He was new to Baltimore, or at least a visitor, but he was from the west coast. He mentioned he was on a recon mission for his higher-ups, possibly his own primogen in his home city, but Alana didn't care as much as the Nosferatu would've believed she did.

He was different and she was bored. Bella, although she was always surrounded by her associates, couldn't stand when Alana was out on her own. It was no secret that Bella was possessive, especially over her childe, but whatever she deemed was hers could *not* be their own person. Alana wasn't an exception either as she was both childe to Bella and living underneath her roof.

Alana laid back on her bed. She stared up at her polished ceiling, her reflection only a fuzzy visage, and a smile caressed her face. Her chest was light and airy – a feeling she hadn't had in years. She couldn't stop smiling, not now, and hopefully forever. Her headspace was clouded with the newest fledgling – his boyish little face clouding all her ambitious thoughts. Even her own voices in her head became whispers as his name floated around.

He was exciting – something shiny and new she wanted to cherish. He was just like her; a Malkavian, and a far better Malkavian than Bella. Her sister waltzed around like a Toreador, but behind closed doors she was a stark-raving lunatic. Before their loft was remodeled, Bella thought the wallpaper was crawling and had every inch of wall peeled back, with a potato peeler no doubt. Another time she caught Bella picking every fiber of carpet with a tweezer. Alana wasn't as hysterical as Bella and she never hoped she would be like her.

On the other hand, she was interested to see how Will teetered between reality and insanity. He wasn't addled or sickened like the other Malkavians Alana had met over the years; drug addiction prior to the *embrace* did that to most Malks. He wasn't hiding his nature like Bella did with fancy clothes. There was no need for a sane Malkavian, especially not now as the world was becoming topsy-turvy, and Alana needed someone to share the madness with.

He was an abnormality of the rarest kind and Alana waited on pins and needles to see what he'd do next.

Downstairs, she heard locks clicked which instinctively made her rise. She was quick to bolt for the closet, as many times she done before, and hunkered down inside. She listened with all the hairs on her neck and arms standing at attention. The familiar clicks of heels on the marbled floor left goosebumps on Alana. Bella was undoubtedly home and with the crescendo of her heels across the floor meant she was *irritated*. Alana couldn't simply vanish, not with Bella somewhere in the loft, and there wasn't a window she could escape from in her bedroom.

The closet had become a familiar haven. The many nights Bella would lock Alana away in the closet was a haunting reminder she was not an individual, rather, a possession to be kept secluded away. Alana traced her fingers along the etched marks in the wood; a memento of her internment. The many articles of clothing that shielded her in the darkness became a loving embrace. She waited long, agonizing moments till the clicking of heels reverted to silence. Alana sheepishly sneaked out the closet with her eyes peeled towards her bedroom door. Out of the closet, she was lithe on her feet as she slipped back into her clothes. She carried her shoes underneath her arm.

She was careful when unlocking her bedroom door as the lock noisily clicked as she turned it. The hallway was dark saved for the lamp towards the end of it. The paintings Bella had adorned the walls with stared Alana down as she crept down the hallway. Their beady eyes

present to watching her escape. Her bare feet were silent on the marble floor as she paced past Bella's office.

It was until she was downstairs did she catch a glimpse of her sister at the island counter who was already aware of Alana's presence. She was smiling, the same smile that left Alana sick, and the other sister knew how much she frightened Alana. Alana stopped and sat her shoes down on the floor. Her eyes remained like needles on her sister. There were unspoken threats lingering in the air as Bella eyed her sister, and vice versa, as Alana was just as threatening.

"I had people looking for you, sister.", Bella coldly says, swishing around the liquid in her glass. "Oh, how I've missed you."

"Save it.", Alana rebutted. "You could care less where I am."

"That's not true, Alana. I'm always concerned where you are."

"Yeah? You should've put a collar on me if you were that worried.", Alana was more-so angry with Bella, but she kept it from seething over.

Bella scoffed under her breath as she was mildly tickled by her sister's cynicism. Alana didn't need to be catered to let alone babied into believing her dear, marvelous sister of hers had an ounce of empathy for her. Alana slipped her feet into her shoes as Bella swiveled from around the island counter. Her glass remained abandoned with not a drop onto the floor.

The younger sister looked up to where the Baroness loomed over her with her jaded eyes narrowed and unforgiving. Alana felt the unbridled cruelty Bella kept restrained within her manicured hands and braced for an upcoming slap, or knee to the face. However, the expectation fell flat as Bella walked away from her, preferring the comfort of the loveseat looking out over Baltimore.

She sighed under her breath but kept a wary eye over to her sister. Bella was unreadable in moments like these; one moment she was content, another moment she was beating Alana seven ways bloody. Alana didn't know how Bella became this way, or was she always mean-spirited, but she wasn't going to stay a moment longer to contemplate. Once her heels was laced up onto her ankles again, she was quick to abscond towards the door. Before her hand could curl around the doorknob, a skewed look from Bella felt like a hot knife into her back.

"Where do you think you're going, *childe*?", Bella warned. "You shouldn't leave."

"I'm going to visit my friends.", Alana confessed. "Is that such a crime?"

"Your *Anarch* friends, Alana?", questions Bella, seemingly disgusted. "Or your *human* friends?"

"Is there a difference? I'm leaving.", Alana turned back to the door and twisted the knob. She felt another searing stab into her back and she was forced to turn around towards Bella.

When Bella exerted her control, Alana was no longer her sister, but her *childe* – offensive, for the most part as Alana wasn't considered a childe anymore. She was a formidable vampire

capable of taking care of herself but when Bella wanted to be ruthless, she'd berate Alana's lack of age and deem her 'childe' instead. Alana swallowed and returned her hand to her side. She took a step away from the door and turned around. The blood they shared between them anchored her back.

She felt small when she confronted her sister; her sire, and she wished she could melt. Bella gestured for Alana to come closer with her finger curled in a repetitive motion. Alana did as she was instructed, reluctantly, as to refuse her sire meant corporal punishment of the gravest kind. Bella grabbed one of her hands and brushed her velvety fingers over cool skin. Alana felt the disgust bubbling in her stomach and she did her best to keep herself from regurgitating. The ministrations brought back familiar trauma she had no desires to remember. She jerked her hand away and Bella frowned.

"Why are you doing this?", Alana asks, seeing the way Bella played with the suspender hanging off her skirt. "Stop playing sick games with me."

"I'm not playing a game with you, my progeny.", Bella refuted, letting go of the suspender. She looked at her sister with softening eyes. "I was worried about you. Can't I be worried about you, Alana?"

"No", she replied flatly. "You worry about your constituents more than me or this club."

"Don't be so crass, Alana. It takes more than what you know to be a Baron, let alone a Baroness.", Bella lectured. "The world wasn't meant for women like us."

Alana crossed her arms. Their world, the world of darkness, was unforgiving in terms of strife and politics even without gender into the mix. Bella maneuvered through the murkiness to reveal herself as a predator, but Alana saw her nothing more as a coward. Time and time again Bella blamed higher, unseen powers from halting her ascension, but it was their dark secret that led her into descension. She pressed her lips together as Bella found a fixation onto another suspender.

"Don't *touch* me.", Alana warned, seeing how Bella reached out for her hand again. "I don't like it when you touch me."

"You never used to be like this.", the older sister complained. "We used to be the best of friends. *Sisters* even."

Alana's skin crawled.

"If you weren't *psychotic*, Bella, we wouldn't ever be in this sick relationship you call a sisterhood.", hissed Alana, turning around on her heels to shoot towards the door.

As if she was ripped away by some monstrous force, Alana found herself tumbling into the couch, nearly tipping it over from her impact. When she rose, she felt a hand curled tightly into her hair and yanked her up from the floor. She was tossed again, her victim being the hapless bookshelf filled with not a single book. The structure fell on top of her and Alana laid still on the floor with a drooling stream of blood coming out of her nose. She looked up to

where Bella stood, wide-eyed and maniac, and she grinned. Alana got the bookshelf from o top of her and shakily went back up onto her feet.

“That’s all you are – a *crazy*, psycho bitch of a Malkavian.”, Alana taunted, the corners of her lips curling into a childish grin. “Come on then, *sire*. Let *daddy* put you in the fun house.”

That wounded her.

Alana noticed the change of expression in Bella at her last taunt. There was much Bella hadn’t revealed about her human life, but Alana knew the awfully dark, demented affair Bella had with a certain man. A man they shared mutuality with as their bloodline had been shared not just between them, but another sire. Her sister never brought it to life although Alana knew of her dirty secret. The secret curled and tickled her ears whenever Bella tempted to her give it life.

Infuriated, it took only Bella mere seconds to cross the room, but Alana already anticipated her movement and hastily made her way away from Bella. Her sister clawed a vicious scrawl into the wall as Alana was at the door, letting herself out the apartment, and ran as fast she could down the hallway. The elevator waited for her like a welcomed mirage in the desert and Alana didn’t look back until she was inside its steel haven. Bella was in the doorway with a bewildered, panicked look plastered on her face.

Alana reveled in the sight as underneath the jewelry, makeup, and refinement, Bella was no different than her or any other Malkavian out in Baltimore. She was still a pathetic, lonesome creature that when confronted, unraveled string by string. Alana knew she would reap the consequences later, as Bella was still her sire and she was still earthly bound to her. They still shared blood and lineage, nothing so simple as a mortal divorce.

Out of the elevator, Alana was in haste to clear herself away from *The Insanitarium*. Patrons, the ones familiar with Alana, hailed her down with promises of her share of their illicit drugs, but she declined them all. Lou the bartender noticed her departure but made not a single note to wish her farewell. She didn’t expect the bartender to do such – he’d taken his fair share of lashings on her behalf already.

The first place Alana thought to escape to was the *Bay View* diner, but that idea quickly soured as it would’ve been the first place Bella would look. She walked many blocks till she entered Anarch territory, slightly wary of the many eyes that watched her from around street corners and apartment buildings. She had no qualms with the Anarchs, in fact, she supported their movement but with her relationship with Bella – the Anarchs were cautious of her allegiances. She owed nothing to Bella other than her embrace. She slipped into a nearby late-night café.

The music was soft, lullaby-like but the soothing notes were hauntingly cold. The patrons that sat at high-stooled tables and at the counter eyed her arrival and Alana stiffened. She casually walked up to the counter towards the barista preparing late-night coffee. The barista looked at her with gleaming yellow eyes; a Gangrel, and acknowledged Alana by handing her a warm drink. Alana held it in her hands and looked down. The red liquid swirled around with the sharp aroma of blood. She thanked the barista and the barista returned to serving the other patrons waiting for their drinks nearby.

She was on friendly-grounds, or at least, neutral-grounds because if she was unwelcomed here, a stake would've been in her chest already. She raised the cup to her lips and sipped the warmed blood. It was fresh, possibly harvested mere minutes before her arrival, and it left Alana with fullness. The barista returned to where Alana stood. Alana gave back the cup and began to dig into her shirt to retrieve her cash, but the barista shook her head.

"You looked like you needed it.", the barista suggested, her accent deep and husky. "More than these punks around here."

Alana smiled and feigned her blush.

"Thank you…", she began, not seeing where the barista wore a name-tag. "I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

"Candice. My name is Candice.", introduced the barista. "And you're Alana Bloom, yes?"

Alana nodded. People knew of her then she knew of them – a plus being the sister and childe to the Baroness of Baltimore. The barista kindly smiled and went to service another patron. Alana watched idly as the café was relatively empty. The patrons near her were wayward, possibly lonesome creatures like Alana, but with a better taste for ambiance than a run-down diner. Candice came back with another cup and Alana took shallow sips. She licked her lips.

Candice leaned against the bar counter as Alana sipped her drink. She was curious of Alana, her eyes frequently scanning her appearance, and her interest piqued in seeing how Alana studied her as well. She was beautiful, even for a Gangrel, though her physique was much more refined and masculine than Alana's frame. Her skin, though greyed from the embrace of the grave, was etched with many colored tattoos. Her dyed hair was swept back behind her pointed ears and she looked more wolfish than she did a vampire. Oddly enough, Alana felt attracted to her.

"Is this where lonely hearts come to die?", Alana flirts, eyeing how Candice hid her smile. "Or just mine?"

"Everyone's heart is dead here.", Candice replied, pointing out the others in the café. "Your heart is looking for someone?"

Alana tucked her hair behind her ears as she laughed. She had not a lover who she cared about, or a friend, not even an enemy, but she still felt the butterflies in her chest when her thoughts slipped over to Will. He had a synergy Alana matched with and even for the brief moments they were interlocked with lips and tongue battling, Alana never felt so synchronized. She leaned over the counter with her bosom dipping dangerously low in her shirt. Candice, though very much corpse-cold, had tinges of a flush staining the tips of her pointed ears. She parted her lips and teased them alongside Candice's jawline. She stopped once she reached the shell of the barista's ear.

"Where can I find Will Graham?"

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the support.

Mercurio

Chapter Summary

Chilton discovers the horrors of the sarcophagus and Alana attempts to make a friend.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for descriptions of wounds, injuries, and gore. Please continue with caution.

XVII
“Mercurio”

Chilton was distracted with the many business ventures and propositions stacking high on his desk. His dinner was cold and untouched on the edge of the desk. He was never a procrastinator, but recently, he couldn’t seem to keep focus. His hands fidgeted whenever he sat still for too long and he had an overwhelming need to release his uneasiness. However, he was still diligent in proving his worth to Hannibal.

He procured the Prince’s preferred vintage as stock had replenished. The Prince had a peculiar taste when it came to blood which Chilton found mind-boggling. He had no preference on sex and ethnicity, but he was critical about physique. The Prince would request stock with little-to-no body fat, or he would ask for stock on the bulkier side, but never did he request the same kind of stock twice. Chilton never thought to ask Hannibal of his palate as it would have been rude to inquire about it. It did keep him interested as Hannibal was a creature of habit, even if the Prince didn’t admit it, and the good doctor learned something new about him every night.

The strangest thing of all was that Chilton never had to send his team out to recover the bodies. At the beginning of their arrangement, the Prince required so many pints of blood to be delivered to him periodically throughout the week. The arrangement was simple in nature and Chilton fulfilled every order without fail. It wasn’t until Chilton began to traffic the stock directly to Hannibal did the bodies disappear. He assumed that Hannibal personally had the bodies taken away, but again, Chilton had offered to do anything the Prince needed regarding his meals. Again, it puzzled him but he never brough his discretions to the Prince.

Chilton turned his attentions towards his laptop. The screen showed camera feedback in full definition. He could see every speck in such clarity that it made it easier for him not to strain

his healing eyes to watch. The feedback was dull as it was the live footage within the *Elizabeth Dane*'s hull. The Prince had called him earlier in the night to keep a diligent eye on the *Elizabeth Dane*, but for hours on end the feedback remained mundane.

The ship was eerily dark within saved for the lights gleaming onto an enormous, golden box wrapped up in crime tape. Chilton was not a scholar of history or did he consider himself ineptly interested towards the box, but it did demand his attention. The intricate carvings and details meant the box was much older than the ship it was harbored on. The good doctor watched as a security guard made his round around the sarcophagus. He seemed as disinterested in the sarcophagus as Dr. Chilton and he walked out the frame.

Moments later, the feedback flickered. Dr. Chilton raised his eyebrow and leaned in closer to the laptop. The feedback stabilized moments later, then violently shook, before becoming static. Chilton tapped at the keyboard until the feedback came up and the camera was obscured in a shroud of shadowy red. When he tried to zoom in, he was startled to see that the box was very much moving – rattling, shaking, and drenched with viscera. He made out a shadowy appendage retracting back underneath the crevice of the sarcophagus's lid with what looked to be a human leg. Rightfully frightened, Chilton was quick to minimize the screen to his email inbox. He clicked onto the Prince's email address and began to type:

To: <hl@email.com> Sent on Monday at 11:16 P.M
From: <fc@email.com>
Subject: Inquiry on the Elizabeth Dane

To my regnant,

Good evening. It's come to my attention that the *Elizabeth Dane* and the contents held inside have shown abnormal activity. The sarcophagus has moved – and, frankly, my Prince, I'm certain that what lies within it is very much alive. I'd caution opening the sarcophagus till we understand what's inside. An extraction team will be put together, but in the meantime, I suggest sending in the fledgling, Will Graham, for reconnaissance. I'm always happy to serve you.

Your confidant,
Frederick Chilton

His hands shook with trepidation as he finished composing the email. He brought the mouse over it to send it off and it wasn't till the laptop chirped did he feel a slight prang of relief. He was scared even more so as that someone, or *something*, inside that sarcophagus was self-aware and moving. The evil that lied within had a hunger if the remains of the security guard thrashed about like dirty laundry wasn't an indication. Chilton stood up onto his feet with his good arm bracing himself against the desk. He hobbled over for his cane and slugged his way down the hallway. His overnight nurses gave him a worried look, but he dismissed them away as he attempted to descend the stairs. He stopped halfway down to catch his breath – his salvia bubbling over his bruised lips. The bandages became hot and heavy wrapped around his face. He had begun to peel them away from his salve-covered face as he sat down on the steps. His cane slipped down towards the bottom of the stairs. His hands wouldn't stop

shaking no matter how he tried to keep them cusped in his lap. His nurses remained guarded in the foyer as Chilton heaved and panted on the staircase.

“Help me back upstairs.”, the words bubbled out from his lips messily. “Please.”

The pair of nurses came to where he was incapacitated on the staircase and Chilton used them as a crutch to get back upstairs. They walked him to his bedroom, changing him out his daytime attire into his night clothes, and into bed. The younger nurse, a fair woman named Beth, peeled the rest of the soiled bandages off his face. She grimaced though it was short-lived as her accompanying coworker, the older nurse, Sarah, already had the first-aid kit ready. Together they cleaned Chilton’s face, gentle hands wiping away the salve, pus, and blood from his healing wounds, and redressed his face. He was thankful as he couldn’t have done this himself, not with his hands quaking, and his nerves rattled.

Once they finished, Beth and Sarah excused themselves to clean up. Chilton painfully rolled over and listened to them leave. His heart trilled around in his chest like the march of a thousand drummers. He couldn’t shake the image of seeing the evil slither from inside the sarcophagus. He completely entrusted the Prince to not open it, or any of his associates, for all their sakes. He reached over to his nightstand to turn on the lamp – the bright glow making the room an orange hue. He couldn’t sleep without the light on not with his anxiety in hyperdrive. He dragged the heavy duvet over his head. Even underneath the covers, Chilton felt all his terrors loom over him. Periodically, Beth and Sarah came into the room to check on his condition, but not one of them came in to comfort his anxieties. He didn’t pay them for that, yet he craved to be shielded from the bumps in the night.

After all, there was monsters and terrors rattling around in a not-so-cursed jack-in-the-box.

Alana stood outside the apartment complex with her hands huddled deep into the pockets of a jacket she borrowed from Candice. It was oddly warm and fashionable, even for Alana’s standards, and it kept her identity mostly hidden from wandering eyes. Candice had given her the address; 1616 Tudor Lane Unit 9, though Alana had begun to question how the barista obtained Will’s address. She figured that through the grapevine, some Camarilla lackey with a bigmouth gabbed into the wrong ears. No one had a well-guarded secret in Baltimore.

Baltimore bustled with pedestrians and traffic as she was like a buoy in open water. People brushed and squeezed from all sides and it harbored paranoia as with bodies came eyes – some eyes blue, brown, and often red. She was no safer than being in *The Insantarium*, but her sister had agents scattered amongst the cobbled alleys of Baltimore, stalking, reporting back to her overbearing sister. Each face that blurred past was reminiscent of those furious eyes Bella flashed at her and Alana kept her face lowered.

She wasn’t sure if it was appropriate to visit Will, especially, not knowing whether Bella had her goons ready to pounce on Alana at a moment’s whim. She didn’t want to bring that kind of trouble to the fledgling as he had his own tribulations surrounding him. His apartment, *elysium*, was his haven as vampires needed a place other than the grave to feel at home. Alana felt like she was intruding on sacrosanct land. However, she didn’t have elsewhere to go.

She mustered the courage to enter the apartment complex. The foyer was empty saved for a custodian haunting the hallway with his mop slushing around dirtied water. He was preoccupied in slushing the mop around as his music, obnoxiously loud, made the adjoining hallway a cacophony of noise. Sneaking past the custodian, she briskly walked up the stairs and into another elongated hallway. Thousands of thoughts criticized her, urging her to return home, and to never come back, but another thousand urged her to continue. She did the latter as she passed by doors; one, two, three, four, and so forth. Each door was immaculately painted with minimal decorations surrounding their entryways. The tenants behind each door was conservative with their living quarters as not a spot, speck, or punched hole was visible as she made her way to the end of the hallway, unlike the many apartments Alana had the displeasure of being in.

When she met Will this time, she wanted it to be on fresh, friendly terms and not in a nightclub and inebriated off illicit party drugs. He'd appreciate her humility, at least Alana hoped, and it would resolve some of the tension they had. She found the apartment door and sighed. She looked over the enameled '9' on the door with the sense of dread falling over her. Her hand reached out to knock.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

She stood back from the door and kept the jacket wrapped tightly on her. The seconds she stood there elongated into years as trepidation made her hands shake and her throat tight. Alana stiffened when she heard footsteps coming closer, locks turning, and a latch being shifted. From behind the door, Will Graham stood in the doorway with a surprised, or rather, scared look on his face. Alana smiled, a tad bit hard, and clasped her hands together.

"Will—I'm Alana, remember? I got your address from your Anarch friend.", she smoothly lies, seeing how Will was beginning to bristle. "May I come inside?"

The Malkavian contemplated her greeting, seemingly skeptical, but nevertheless there was a tinge of red flushed across his cheeks and on the tips of his ears. Alana felt her smile widened. He must've remembered their rendezvous. Alana had that charming effect on most people. She couldn't be forgotten, or at least, not her lips or her body. Will stepped aside and gestured for her to come inside. Elated, she practically skipped inside and shed her jacket onto the nearby island counter.

The apartment was nice for the locale. The kitchen was modest though there wasn't a single appliance on the counter. The living room was obviously more than a living room as pillows and blankets remained scattered amongst the floor and disheveled couch. Alana took note of the place as Will closed and locked the door behind them. He was still wary of her presence as he watched her walk around the apartment. Alana would be too if her would-be-stalker showed up at her front door not even a night after they met.

"Sit anywhere you like.", Will offered, walking past Alana to begin gaffing up the mess of pillows and blankets. "Sorry, I just woke up."

Alana smiled and took a seat at the small, circular dining table. She kept her eyes scanning around the room as Will tidied up. She then began to watch him. His movements were precise, but awfully sluggish. His hands fumbled with the blankets, but his eyes remained

exceedingly clear to what he was focused on. It was abnormal to say the least, as if his body and brain were separate entities sharing the same host, and Alana made note of it. His appearance hadn't changed much since the last they met; his hair started to sprout into tighter curls, but otherwise he was looking the same. However, he didn't keep eye contact with Alana for too long as his gold-trimmed eyes would bounce back to what his hands struggled with.

"Is Brian still here?", Alana questioned, seeing that the Anarch wasn't around. "Or did he just step out?"

"He's out.", Will abruptly replied, standing up with the pillows and blankets balled up between his arms. He stacked them high onto the couch. His face was reddened, and Alana could make out the fine wrinkles accompanying his frown.

"How did you find us?", he asked. "I didn't tell anyone where I stayed at."

"Your Anarch friend—", Alana replied.

"I don't have *any* friends.", Will sharply scolded. "Again, who gave you my address?"

The female vampire pursed her lips and felt the aura of the room sour. She didn't want their first actual meeting turning this way as she already romanticized their encounter. They were supposed to be akin to each other with their tainted bloodlines being the glue that kept them bonded. She had expected Will to see she came in peace and not to terrify, or molest him, but with the look Will was giving her now, it was a hot, searing look reserved for enemies and ex-girlfriends. Alana seethed and caved in.

"People talk, Will.", she confessed. "I know I shouldn't have come here, but I just couldn't resist."

"What do you want from me, Alana?", the fledgling asked. "I never told the Baroness I knew where you were."

Alana was at ease knowing Will didn't reveal where she was to her sister. Although her sister found her later on, he hadn't been compelled to kiss her ass. Her smile pressed against her face as she cupped her hands on the dining table. Her wants were arbitrary on the surface; blood, sex, and rock and roll. She had lived many decades to know that wants were superficial; wealth, sports cars, and fame. However, when she looked at Will with his gold-trimmed eyes clouded with skepticism, she placed her wants there. He was the only Malkavian she could relate to, share in the turmoil of madness, unlike Bella and her wanton need to manipulate and scorch every relationship around her.

"I want belonging – someone I can relate to.", explains Alana, pressing her nails deep into the palms of her hands. "Someone to share in the mania that is our unnatural life."

Will grimaced and paced towards the kitchen. Alana watched as he dug in the icebox and retrieved familiar pouches of blood bags. He went to the cabinets and reached up into them. He opened both bags and poured the luscious liquid into respective glasses. Not once did he cast a stare to Alana, by all means, stared at him with her eyelashes batting. He came to the

dining table and sat down the glasses. Alana gratefully accepted the drink as Will took his seat across from her. His hands curled around the glass, but his gaze remained focused in his lap. The air around them was stale. Alana couldn't help but politely cough, hoping it would woo the attention of the fledgling across from her, but alas it did not.

They sat in silence for a long time with the traffic outside humming like cicadas in the night. Alana hardly touched her drink and found herself pushing it further away from her. Will didn't touch his drink either as his eyes gradually lifted to meet Alana's hopeful gaze. His frown was tightly strained but began to relieve the longer Alana dotted on him. He gave in and casted his eyes away with the same boyish shyness he exhibited periodically.

"We aren't alike.", confesses Will as he tapped his fingertips against his glass. "No one is like me – regardless of what I'm told."

Alana sucked in a breath through her teeth. She wanted to tell how wrong Will was that them being Malkavians made them more kin than he knew. Their inborn ability to shift through the delusions and laugh at the face of insanity made them impervious. She leaned forward in her chair with her stare becoming narrow. Will instinctively leaned back but he was entangled into her binding stare. Her own eyes kept a tinge of gold around them; a marker of her affliction.

"Look at me, Will.", Alana suggested. "Look at me and tell me we aren't alike."

Will hesitated but not once did he blink. Staring into Will's eyes was like delving into a cataclysm of storm grey clouds. Alana saw the glitter of her reflection behind those cloudy orbs before they darkened and shined with the gold outlining them. In this moment, they were attuned to each other's vibratos.

"What are you, Alana?", Will questioned. "What grave has spurned you?"

Alana stifled her laugh as she rested her head onto her hands. Truly, she didn't know what she was other than her name, her affliction, and for the most part, what she was perceived as. In so many words, she was everything and nothing at the same time. To Will, she hoped to be a good friend, but for the rest of the world she hoped to be a figment of the imagination. She raised her head up just as Will sat back across from her.

"Nothing but a reflection, Will.", she responded. "A reflection that wants to watch you, guide you, protect you, and even love you."

"But firstly, I'm a Malkavian, just like you."

Will sucked in his teeth.

"That means the Baroness is too, right?"

Alana nodded.

"I thought of her as a Toreador.", Will seemed relieved, if not made right with his assumption. "Brian lied."

Alana rolled her eyes. Bella got that often, but at the end of the day, she was a Malkavian like the both of them. She loved to play dress-up, but underneath she was nothing more than a stark-raving harpy of a Malkavian, just like Alana, and the hundreds of others across Baltimore.

“Surprise, surprise – it’s one of my dear sister’s dirty secrets.”

“She’s not your actual sister.”, Will quotes, pointing towards Alana. “If you haven’t noticed.”

Alana hides her smile behind her long fingers.

“No she isn’t, clever boy.”

“Are we hear to discuss paternity?”

“Of course not, Will.”

“Why are you here?”, Will asked. “You didn’t come here to recite love poems to me, did you?”

“No, actually, but I’ve been thinking of you as of late.”

“I wish not to be thought of, unless it is for my obituary.”, Will replied, eyeing the glass in front of him.

“Don’t fret. I won’t be writing you love letters any time soon.”

The fledgling crossed his legs and stretched his neck from side to side. Alana could still see the freshly punctured marks tattooed into his neck. She was being honest, something she never had a chance to be, and pouring her heart into the words she curated. Though she jested with her feelings, it was evident that the fledgling across from her could read between the blurred, often murky lines. Will reached for his drink and downed it quickly. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand; the blood staining his lips a gorgeous rouge.

“Again, why did you come here?”, his tone made sharpened by his tongue. “I’m supposed to find you and your Nosferatu friend.”

Tung.

Alana scoffed under her beath and averted her gaze. Bella wanted Tung, of course, as she couldn’t stand Alana’s attention elsewhere. In reality, Tung had no love, or hate, from Alana and she could care less whether he was still in Baltimore or elsewhere.

“Don’t worry about Tung, Will.”, Alana chided. “He’s far from this place.”

“Then, what other reason do you have being here?”

“I wanted to make amends with you.”, Alana began to sip at her drink. “I shouldn’t have invaded your space like that.”

Will nodded.

“I’m used to it.”

“Still wasn’t right for me to do that – I didn’t mean to confuse you.”

Alana pushed the glass further away from her as she couldn’t stomach any more blood. She was already content with the drinks Candice supplied her with, but she couldn’t drown herself anymore. Will took note and took her glass away into the kitchen. He poured the thick, sanguine liquid down the drain and washed the cup out. Alana watched, but returned her gaze towards the open window. Once Will came back to the table, she shot a gaze back to the fledgling.

“So, is Brian coming back?”

Will shrugged his shoulders.

“He comes and goes.”, Alana could sense the disappointment from Will. “But he always comes back.”

“Sounds like a good friend.”

“Yeah, I guess he is.”, Alana took note of how Will softened when talking about Brian. The Anarch was trustworthy, for vampire standards, and a man of his word. He was Will’s only friend thus far and it was expected that the fledgling saw him in high regard. It was nice to hear Will had someone he could at least count on.

“Oh, so you *are* a liar with his pants on fire?”, Alana jested, eyeing how Will contemplated his next response. The fledgling’s lips twisted, but flatlined into a defeated frown. “He is your friend!”

“I mean…”, Will trailed off, seemingly embarrassed. “Yes, he’s my friend but that doesn’t explain why you’re here.”

“Look, I just wanted to come by and say sorry for how I acted-“, the older vampire started.

“You’ve been attacked.”, he suggested. He pointed to her battered nose and lip.

“Will, I can take care of myself.”, Alana attempted to defend herself. “This isnt anything compared to what-“

“The Baroness has done this to you, or am I wrong?”, Will’s rebuttal was quick, unrelenting. Alana cringed as she impatiently tapped her leg on the floor.

“That’s why you came here. To escape?”

Alana folded her arms as she pressed her lips together. She caught her leg and forced it to remain still. If her reddened nose, or bruised lip, or even the blemishes flowering along her neck wasn’t her battle scars, Will knew regardless. She scoffed under her breath, but soon the cool tears flooded from her tear ducts and down her cheeks. The table was soon wet with her

fallen tears as she couldn't help but to continue crying. Will took notice and tentatively reached his arm out from across the table. At first, Alana feinted from his sudden touch, but laxed once she felt his hand clasp on top of hers. His look wasn't of caution anymore, but of understanding, no longer clouded with delusions. Alana wiped her blotchy, blue-black tears away with the pad of her fingers as Will rubbed comforting circles into her hand.

"If she's such a monster.", he asked. "Why haven't you fought back?"

A moment of pause drifted between them.

"She's your sire…", Will admitted. "That must be it, otherwise you would've killed her by now."

Alana swallowed. She brushed a stray curl behind her ear as she refrained from speaking. The thought was dangerous, borderline heresy as Bella was her sire, and to murder her own sire meant her condemnation to a final death. As terribly cruel Bella was as she subjected Alana to years of trauma and beatings, Alana couldn't bring herself to kill her sister. They were bound together to the mortal earth beneath them, and perverted as it was, Alana suckled from Bella's teat as if she bore her out of own her womb. The *embrace* was just that; a mother suckling her child. She would shrivel and die without Bella's teat ever so close. Will watched her cry and his eyes moistened, then tears fell, but his expression remained blank. Alana looked at him, first with confusion, then secondly with understanding.

"Oh you sweet thing.", Alana cooed, wiping her own blackened tears. "You're nothing but heart, aren't you?"

The fledgling broke his expression with a short smile. Alana had to remember that she had Bella for many decades as a sire, though not the best decades of her life, but Will had not even one with his own sire. The terrible night in question wasn't enough to know a sire, let alone begin to understand who they are. Alana rose from the table to pace to the kitchen. She ran the faucet cold and took a nearby dish cloth to wipe away the weeping remnants of her makeup. She looked over her shoulder to find Will wiping his own tears with his sleeve.

"Don't you feel sorry for me, Will Graham.", Alana lectured coyly. "Never feel sorry because in this city, it'll get you eaten alive."

Tough, but an honest lesson Alana had instilled in her since her mortal days. Baltimore was an unforgiving master, quick to anger and merciless with the whip. Will was innocent, for the most part, but he wore his heart much on his sleeve like she did was she was nothing more but a fledgling. She wasn't the only one who did so, but Will would need to shelter himself should he survive any longer. His preservation through Alana's watchful eye and more importantly, Brian's eagerness, would earn him many decades to his unnatural life. Alana turned the faucet off and leaned her back against the counter. Will had gotten up to stand in the living room with his side facing her. He had stopped crying, but his dreadful expression remained. She wanted nothing more but to chase his monsters away, but they were monsters without monsters to chase them.

She went to the living room sofa and sat down. She unfurled her legs across the softened cushions and gestured Will to join her. He hesitated but surrendered as Alana was not to be

denied. He was small compared to her as he hunkered low into his shell. He was wary from their last physical encounter, but nevertheless, Alana glided her arms around him. She tightened her embrace as the fledgling didn't resist. She could smell the shampoo in his hair and the blood underneath his nails. The bitemark she gave him was still tinged pink but fading. It was comforting to be held, and to hold, and Alana longed for the nights she was comforted from her nightmares. Bella never did such a thing, arguing that they were vampires, not scared children hiding from their boogeymen. However, they were just that; scared children with boogeymen. Malkavians especially, nothing was more maddening not knowing what in the reflection are themselves, or their personal boogeymen. Will dropped his head into her lap which had caught her off guard.

Her hands found sanctuary in his shortened curls and began to rove around his scalp. The ministrations earned her a sigh as Will stared into the television set. The nightly broadcast was recapping their latest news, but nothing new to them. The city was never short of murders, robberies, and would-be reactionaries. Alana kept her fingers massaging as Will laid in her lap seemingly comforted by her work. He adjusted himself to lay on his back with his eyes piercing upwards to Alana. They were clear, not the clouded shroud that often obscured his vision, and beautiful.

"I'm still not sure whether you are a friend.", Will says, furrowing his brows as he studied Alana's face. "You haven't tried to kill me yet."

Alana playfully scoffed and kept her hands still. She had no qualms against Will, but if she wanted to kill him, she would've done it within *The Insanitarium* and not a soul would've known she'd done it. He was like a newborn, soft, pliant, heavily dependent on a mother to keep him close. She would not hold him at her breast for she was not his sire, but, she would shelter and chase the monsters who would render his flesh into bite-size morsels. As those stormy eyes became covered underneath darkened eyelashes, Alana kept her embrace sound tight. For now, she was satisfied they were on mutual terms, dared to call it friendly.

"I'll guide you the best I can.", Alana confesses, lowering her face close to Will's to lay a soft kiss onto his forehead. She heard another sigh

"For your wings are made of wax and I will not let you burn."

Scapegoat

Chapter Summary

Tobias reflects on his rocky history with Hannibal.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for graphic descriptions of death and violence. Please continue with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XVIII
“Scapegoat”

The precinct was quiet, abnormally so, as the regular hustle and bustle of cops and would-be criminals was nonexistent. The cells were empty saved for the sobering drunk or would-be call girl. Tobias sat at his desk with a tower of unfiled paperwork looming over him. His dinner was a cold coffee growing even colder the longer it was left unattended. Crime was at a standstill, at least for the night, as the officers left haunting their graveyard of a precinct was more preoccupied in their naps to be out on patrol. Tobias had the displeasure of working overtime making sure reports were recorded and categorized before the night’s end.

Deskwork was the bane of his existence. His fingers grew cramped and tingly from gripping his pen for so long. Yet, he wasn’t allowed to be out on patrol, let alone in public with his badge and gun. The limits of his suspension barred him from active police work, but he was still chained to his desk filing reports and disturbances his coworkers would abandon at his desk. He would grimace and mumble under his breath and reluctantly take the overload of their work underneath his care. His badge sat at the corner of his desk like a sour reminder of all he cherished; policework.

From a young age, Tobias was fond of two things: policemen and music. The latter earned him a scholarship into a prestigious music program, but his heart drove him into policing. Yet, there was no longer joy in his career as he was indefinitely suspended. All because he decided he wasn’t going to be on a payroll, or a puppet to the whims of powerful people.

In this case, Hannibal Lecter. The Prince was solely responsible for Tobias’s desk position as through the grapevine, Hannibal influenced the chief of police to bar Tobias from ever walking the streets of Baltimore. It was maddening no matter how Tobias examined his

situation. He was the best in the precinct at apprehending violent criminals, policing the community, and maintaining a good track record. His misfortune because Tobias wasn't going to allow Hannibal, or any other blood-sucking denizen of Baltimore, to do the unspeakable especially for pay. In the end, it costed Tobias his career and most importantly, his marriage, then his child.

In the beginning, it was a promise of a more comfortable life. As many in Baltimore could relate, finances were tight and then wife, Kelly, gave birth to their first son, Pierre, money became strained. It was the start of many arguments as the hospital bills piled at the door each week. Loans only relieved them for a short time, but eventually they had to be repaid. The debt collectors were exceptionally unforgiving to their plight. Tobias worked, sometimes three jobs at a time, just to make sure his wife, recovering from the stressful birth, wasn't forced to go to work while their infant son needed them the most.

Tobias never liked to take handouts – a well ingrained lesson from his parents, and no matter how Hannibal honeyed his offers – Tobias never accepted his offer. Daily, Hannibal contacted Tobias with the same promise of financial comfortability, but again, Tobias declined. The personalized voicemails, the letters, and sometimes the occasional email all went into the trash the longer the Prince kept up at it. Eventually, the calls and letters stopped, but it wasn't without of annoying Tobias to the brink of his patience.

He knew men like Hannibal. They were of privileged stock, blue-blooded by nature, and grossly ignorant to the plight of the working class. They cared little for the downtrodden, unless it was for a show, and Tobias wasn't going to have him or his family be a posterchild for a rich man's faux philanthropy. People like Hannibal made people do the unspeakable for money and if Tobias were to accept what was offered, there was no guarantee he wouldn't be conscripted to do the immoral. Over months' time, Tobias did his best to ignore Hannibal, even after the calls and letters ceased. His marriage, however, took a sour turn as his wife and newborn had pressing needs and with Tobias working extra jobs, he couldn't attend to all of them. Later, his hours would be viciously cut to less than favored, and the odd jobs he performed throughout the weeks dried up. As a last resort, he went to his superiors. He was still a rookie cop without footing of his own, but he begged his superiors for more hours regardless if he had the experience or not.

However, it fell on deaf, uncaring ears as other undeserving officers were granted hours including paid overtime, but Tobias was left with the scraps. Being the rookie within the precinct, especially of his pedigree and color, he was used to being discriminated against, but blatantly passed up left him recoiling inside. He didn't give anyone the satisfaction of seeing him beaten, but inside it felt like a thousand cuts being doused in liquid fire. The last straw was witnessing his wife, Kelly, having to take the brute of the responsibilities of caring for the house and their son on top of working two jobs. It was infuriating as Tobias was raised in a conservative household with his destiny being the sole provider for his family. Though he couldn't argue or bar Kelly from working as the finances were straining by the day, it gutted him seeing how disheveled she was the few nights they were able to meet. The mortgage payments were eating away their savings while diapers, formula, and the ever-so needed supplies for their son chewed away their paychecks. With the threat of his family being displaced, Tobias had to swallow his pride and show humility.

He contacted Hannibal after Pierre's first birthday. It was a reluctant choice as Tobias didn't like to ask, or beg, for anyone's help when it came to taking care of his family. At that time, he didn't know Hannibal with his princely title attached. He figured Hannibal was just another of Baltimore's elite, not the monster galvanizing in a human suit. He was always well-dressed with suits being of foreign origin and meticulously groomed. Never did Tobias see Hannibal with a stray hair out of place, let alone a spot or speck on his attire. Hannibal always stood with his chin slightly lifted, however, and his eyes kept downwards whenever he spoke to someone. It was a well-refined sense of entitlement when Hannibal was in the room.

Tobias saw Hannibal's flaunting as blind hubris.

Their first encounter took place in Hannibal's penthouse. At the time, Tobias was wary of meeting Hannibal on his own, especially on unfamiliar grounds, but the Prince had insisted that the officer should join him for wine. Tobias was sure to arrive on time with the best of what he could afford on. Hannibal invited him inside and Tobias had wide eyes throughout the walkthrough of the penthouse. It was expansive with tall ceilings, glass staircases, and the occasional sculpture decorating the space. The living room alone was much larger than the suburban home Tobias and his family resided in. Hannibal, on the other hand, seemed to be comfortable in his grossly rich space as he was an immaculate host. He catered Tobias's needs, firstly his thirst, but Tobias wanted to be uninhibited by liquor or elsewise. Tobias was offered food – in particular, foodstuff he couldn't pronounce or make out its origins. Respectfully, the officer declined but thanked Hannibal for being gracious.

They spoke in Hannibal's office, much to Tobias's caution, and their conversation was light. Hannibal spoke of his fondness for Baltimore, some of the sights he enjoyed, and the venues he frequented the most. Tobias listened politely, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss. Whether it was his police training or his nerves, Tobias couldn't say, but in hindsight, he was right to be wary of Hannibal. He was offered drink again, but he refused. Yet a drink was poured for him.

It was wine, but the drink Hannibal had was something different in nature. Tobias thought of it as an expensive, imported wine as the color was too rich to be anything domestic. It was thick, curling against the glass unlike Tobias's drink. However, Hannibal didn't take a single sip as long as they were in the office. The officer made note of Hannibal's lack of sating his thirst, or his discretion not to drink in front of the officer.

It was a mental note he kept till this day.

Hannibal initiated the business aspect of their conversation, naturally, and Tobias listened, tuning his ears to any fallacy, lie, or bribe weaved in between.

"It will be a matter of compliance.", Hannibal stated, pointing to a well-drafted contract prepared and in front of Tobias. His slender finger pointed over the inscribed letters, but never once did his eyes lift off Tobias. "Should you accept my offer, you'll find that the terms are in order and very much to your favor."

Tobias picked up the contract and brought it closer, much to Hannibal's delight, and read over the terms. The contract was not to last over a year, but within the timeframe Tobias was

to perform several duties, secretive in nature. Each sentence was disguising a series of loopholes, diversions, and pitfalls to the unsuspecting legal mind. However, Tobias spent many years in educated institutions deciphering the lingo of the law-evading elites and cutthroats.

“You’ll have me do what exactly, Mr. Lecter?”, the office questioned, bringing the contract back onto the desktop. “Be your whipping *boy*? By all means, I very much believe you’d like that.”

Hannibal pursed his lips into a thin, discerning frown.

“Shockingly rude, must I say? I’ll have you do no such thing, Officer Budge.”, Hannibal quips, feinting his disgust behind his frown. “I would ask you to consider this employment as a means of bettering our city.”

Tobias scoffed and crossed his legs over. Hannibal was a comedian, no, a whole comedy act if he would have Tobias believe that himself was wanting for the betterment of Baltimore. With the money, glamour, and prestige oozing from underneath his tailored suit, his finances alone could fund welfare, public safety, and education without much of a dent into his wealth. Tobias was skeptical, but Hannibal was adamant in the reveal of his intentions.

“You truly want to better this city, Mr. Lecter?”, Tobias interrogated. “Open your checkbook – that will help more than just me, and most definitely you seeing you have more than enough.”

Hannibal hid his short, snarky smile with a courteous laugh, but it was obvious that Tobias had struck a nerve. Not once did his poised façade quiver, crack, or even bend from Tobias’s quick rebuttals. Tobias made another mental note.

“I’ve poured financial resources into this city and beyond, but over the years I’ve seen my well-placed intentions fill the pockets of not our most vulnerable, but to the privileged.”, Hannibal stated. “It’s deplorable.”

Tobias agreed, for the most part, as he had firsthand account of how the city continued to fester, but the elite became fatter. He’s seen his own neighborhood turn into a haven for the degenerates, lawless, and forgotten, but the affluent neighborhoods constantly fed from a silver platter. It was deplorable, criminal even. Yet, he kept himself cautious from being swayed by Hannibal’s strong criticisms of his own blue-blooded clan.

“I digress, Officer Budge.”, Hannibal coolly joked. “In all seriousness, I would ask of your loyalty.”

“My *loyalty*?”, Tobias repeated. “Excuse me but, I hardly know you and I can’t be bought like some kind of pet.”

“Yet, loyalty is bought for less. Mr. Budge – may I refer to you as Tobias?”, Hannibal curled his fingers around the throat of his glass and brought it towards his mouth. He swirled the liquid around once, twice, then stopped. He awaited Tobias’s response, but the officer only shrugged.

“It’s fine.”, Tobias said, eyeing how Hannibal took only mere sips of his drink. He watched how the liquid seemed to caress the curves of Hannibal’s lips before being politely patted away under the shroud of a handkerchief.

“See, we are already becoming well-acquainted.”, the Prince gleefully flouted. “Enough of the pleasantries, shall we discuss what I’ve laid out in the contract?”

“Yes, please, as I’m not going to wait on hand and knee for you like your manservant.”, gritted Tobias, growing irate with his would-be employer across from him. It wasn’t a good look to be crass with the man who would be signing his paychecks, but nevertheless, the conversation they were having couldn’t pay the light bill or keep food in his family’s mouths. Hannibal sat his glass down and straightened up.

“If we are going to be in this working relationship of ours, we’ll need to speak like civilized gentlemen instead of savages.”, Hannibal retrieved a pen from his drawer and laid it besides the contract.

“Careful now, Mr. Lecter. I’d argue there’s prejudice behind your words.”, Tobias knew how to play dirty and he secretly enjoyed seeing Hannibal mull over his approach.

The Prince no longer smiled and kept is expression, at best, blank except for his eyebrows being dangerously furrowed towards Tobias.

“I chose you because you have the right intentions.”, he began. “Unlike the compatriots of your precinct, your ulterior motives are noble, note-worthy and quite frankly, justifiable.”

“You seem to know everything about me.”, Tobias crossed his arms and guarded himself. He kept his relationships personal, not even towards his fellow officers, and he’d never disclose his finances or family with Hannibal Lecter. “But I know nothing of you.”

Hannibal’s lips curled into a grin.

“I’m afraid that’s a conversation for another night.”, Hannibal rests his hands in his lap. His stare was deep, menacing almost, and Tobias dryly swallowed.

“Then what do you know about me, Mr. Lecter?”

“I know you have a wife, beautiful and dutifully always by your side, and I know of your son, Pierre.”, Hannibal revealed, calculating how Tobias tensed at the reveal.

The officer bit his tongue and gauged the temperature bubbling over his temper. He didn’t know how much Hannibal knew of his situation, but it didn’t settle with him quite right knowing that Hannibal had intimate knowledge of his marriage, and his son’s name. He clawed his nails into his arms as he sat with a scowl threatening to become a nasty snarl.

“Family is important, Tobias.”, Hannibal continued. “Children, especially. Fathers, like us, need to provide the best to raise our children in hopes that they’ll raise our grandchildren in grandeur.”

Tobias was taken aback at Hannibal's comment of his own fatherhood. The penthouse didn't look to be designed for a child, let alone a family, and the décor itself had not an ounce of familial love. Though Hannibal looked the age of having a child, or at least older children, nothing about him read he was a patriarch. Tobias caught his own prejudice forming at his lips and dismissed it. He had no right to judge whether Hannibal was a father, good or bad, as he himself hadn't been the perfect father or husband.

"I bring this proposition to you with no malice or ill-will. Simply, a means to secure a future for yourself, your wife, and your beautiful boy.", Hannibal smile softened as he gestured for Tobias to look over the contract.

The officer grimaced, but caved in. He grabbed the contract and scanned the document over. He would've liked a legal assistant, or better yet, an actual lawyer here to review the clauses and exceptions, but Tobias lacked the funds to do such. Hannibal neither offered or relinquished legal assistance regarding the document and Tobias wasn't going to beg him for it either. He wrapped his fingers around the pin and signed, much to Hannibal's delight, and at the cost of his pride.

"It's done.", Hannibal announced. "I thank you for commandeering your time for this."

"At the price of my pride, right?", Tobias grumbled.

"Of course not, my dear friend.", beamed the Prince. "You should look forward to this aspect as this is for the future, not for our present."

He rose to his feet and stepped around the desk. Tobias stood as well as the Prince came awfully close. He could smell the savory scent of his cologne wafting around him and Hannibal already had his hand out for a friendly handshake. Tobias offered his own, but when Hannibal's hand slipped into his own, he felt a sheer coldness that tremored a shiver down his back. He never felt a hand so cold and as they shook, once, twice, thrice, the cold becoming a stinging bite. Tobias relieved his hand away from the icy grip and cusped it with his much warmer hand. Hannibal wasn't done with pleasantries, however, as the Prince embraced Tobias into a hug. The officer was taken back and couldn't move. Hannibal's lips kissed one cheek and then the other. Tobias thought of it as a queer European custom, but Tobias's memory became nothing more but a blank after the embrace.

Many days had passed with Tobias returning to his daily, often stressful routine of law enforcement, home life, and child rearing. His neck was sore, painfully so as the raised bump nearing his collarbone throbbed throughout the day. He massaged it, of course, but it was a troublesome condition for many more days after. At work, he focused on his duties rather than socializing and exploring relationships with his fellow officers. His straightforwardness was noted even by his commanding officers, but Tobias made it clear he was hyper fixated on work.

One evening as he came in from a brutal shift, Kelly had informed him that an envelope with an accompanying package was waiting for him on the kitchen counter. She and Pierre were at the dining table with dinner already prepped and dished onto plates. Their son was babbling

over his peas and carrots as Kelly tried to playfully get them into his mouth. Tobias watched with a swell of happiness blooming in his chest.

As he went into the kitchen to retrieve the envelope, he began to wonder if it was Hannibal corresponding with. After the initial signing of the contract, Tobias made several trips back and forth to Hannibal's penthouse. First came his fingerprints and blood draw, which Tobias found even more troubling, but he was under contract. Secondly, Hannibal was to contact Tobias when work arrived, something Tobias had issue with, but again, he was under contract. The Prince never made mention he would send letters.

Tobias opened the letter first with his thumbnail. The letter inside had been written on good, quality paper as the officer rubbed his fingertips over it. He flipped it over to see letters delicately printed with blue-black ink addressed to him:

Dear Tobias,

I'd like to start this letter by thanking you once again for accepting my employment offer. I believe this will be the beginning of a prosperous friendship between us. However, I've had issues with several tenants residing in one of my properties, and I hate to admit it but, local courts would be no help with this delicate situation. My tenants are of a furtive nature when it comes to the immigration of this country. It was through my good heart that I allowed them to reside within my property under conditions they remain employed and dedicated to their immigration status, but circumstances have changed. I am asking of you to escort these tenants from the premises effectively at the time of this letter. The address will be attached, and I implore you to exercise caution in concealing your identity. In the package, I've given you some tools in easing the transition for the now evicted tenants along with your advancement. I hope the funds will be sufficient and I'll have your full payment at the completion of the eviction.

In warm regards,
Hannibal Lecter

Tobias folded the letter and leaned against the island counter. He read over the address typed cleanly into the bottom right of the letter. He hadn't known of any courthouse, especially in the city, that wouldn't be of service in evicting undocumented persons from a residency. If not the courts, surely the police department would've been an instrument had Hannibal went the more authoritarian route. The Prince took a gracious, almost reluctant approach towards his now-ex tenants and Tobias respected his decision. There wouldn't be anything stopping Hannibal from throwing these people already down on their luck, in a new land, and already on edge into the streets. Tobias wondered why he was sent alone in this endeavor, but he dispelled his curiosity. He eyed the package sitting on the other counter. He grabbed scissors out from the knife block as he went to open the package. He sliced it open and inside was another box wrapped in black wrapping paper.

Officer Budge unwrapped the box and within, the contents shocked him. Encased inside was a handgun, a nine-millimeter to be exact, equipped with tactician's sight and reinforced trigger. Next to it was a velvety pouch and Tobias took it out. He found the contents within the pouch to be bullets. However, they weren't the bullets of any caliber he'd use during his policework. They glistened underneath the kitchen light and their color was oddly reminiscent of silver. The bullets had pointed tips, far sharper and at pointe than any bullet he handled, and there was more than enough for a battlefield. Underneath the gun and bullets, there was an envelope simply addressed with Tobias's name on it. He opened that envelope to find several, crisp bills tuckered and bundled. It was a thick bundle of bills, freshly printed, and in his possession. He held his gasp as Kelly was but an earshot away in the dining room.

She looked over to see Tobias shuffling with the box at the counter with a raised eyebrow. Pierre babbled and gurgled while holding his spoon filled with his mashed peas and carrots, urging his mother to help him put it in his mouth, and Kelly complied. Tobias quickly put the box underneath the cabinet, slid the letter into his pocket, and returned to the dining room with the money tucked into his hand. He was shaking in the trepidation of having it that he didn't think to count it. He took his seat at the table just as Kelly was about to open her mouth to speak. However, she was cut short once Tobias placed the money in between their plates. Her eyes became fireworks as she reached for the bills in front of her.

She counted as Tobias' legs became like a marcher's as he watched his wife count their newly acquired funds. With every bill that flicked between his wife's fingers, Tobias could count the bills he could pay off and well in advance. It took her several minutes to catalogue the amount as Pierre ate the last of his mashed vegetables off his spoon. Kelly looked up with dazzling stars in her eyes.

"Do you know how much it is?", she asked, her smile growing wide. "Tobias, baby, I've never seen this much in my life."

"How much, Kelly?", Tobias asked, playing dumbfounded. He knew it was more than enough, but he needed to hear Kelly tell him.

"It's three thousand dollars, Tobias.", Kelly replied. She laughs and covers her reddening face into her hands. Pierre, by all means, laughed alongside his mother as he flung the spoon down to the floor. Tobias reached down to grab the thrown spoon as Kelly sits back in the dining chair with her face flushed.

"Where did you even get this from? Please don't tell me it's from a loan.", though she was excited, Tobias could hear the worry in her tone.

He shook his head and unraveled his silverware from his table napkin.

"I took a security job at one of those fancy clubs downtown. The owner gave me two weeks' worth of a paycheck for going tonight.", he smoothly lied as he equipped his knife and fork.

He began to slice the roast in front of him as Kelly sighed an exhale in relief. He hadn't heard her exhale like that in many months, possibly since before they married, and he felt the familiar swell lift in his chest again. Pierre whined in his highchair and began to squirm and it was Kelly who freed him from his plastic confines. She had him on her lap as he babbled

aimlessly towards the kitchen. Tobias kept a wary eye towards the kitchen as the gun, the bullets, and his job assignment was hidden within.

“They must be really busy?”, Kelly inquired, trying to keep Pierre from wiggling out from her embrace. “It’s great that they’re paying you well in advance. Are you still going to work for the department?”

“Of course.”, Tobias said between bites. “We’ll need as much money to pay off our debts, and for you to stay home more with Pierre.”

“That’s very kind of you Tobias, but I can manage work and Pierre.”, Kelly interjected. “Like you said, we need all the money we can get now especially with Pierre growing like he is.”

An argument for another day – Kelly was a hard-worker, regardless of what Tobias said, and there was no doubt she wasn’t going to hang in the towel over the sum of money on their dining table.

Tobias wiped his mouth with his napkin and sat his fork and knife down. He didn’t have the heart to tell Kelly what his true employment was as it wasn’t exactly legal of him to be working as he was, but he couldn’t shake the feeling something was amiss with Hannibal’s letter. The tenants couldn’t be some meddlesome that Hannibal couldn’t just kick out on his own, but, it was up to Tobias to make them leave. He understood Hannibal’s position, yet there was something he wasn’t telling Tobias. The clock nearby was closing in near ten and Tobias rose up from the dining table. He came around the table to give Pierre a gentle kiss into his curls then to Kelly’s cheek.

“I really appreciate dinner, but if I don’t go now, I’ll be late.”, Tobias lied again, pointing to the clock over their dining table. “Mind wrapping that up for me?”

Kelly nodded and she too got up from the dining table. She began to coo to Pierre who was growing discontent and cranky from his dinner. She made sure to bounce him as she began to walk towards the bedroom they shared. Tobias was quick to get into the kitchen to retrieve the box from underneath the cabinet. He exchanged his gun from the precinct with the one Hannibal provided and tucked the bullets down into his jeans. The boxes were left by the trashcan as he followed Kelly and Pierre down the hallway. In their shared bedroom, Pierre was put down into his crib at the end of his parents’ bed. He continued to babble and fitfully kick his legs just as Kelly was preparing to change him. Tobias went into their closet and tried to find the darkest jacket and cap he had.

“They didn’t provide you a uniform yet?”, Kelly asked, retrieving diapers and a fresh pair of pajamas for Pierre. “Oh, I’m forgetful. It’s your first night.”

Tobias chuckled as he zipped up the jacket and made sure his cap was fitted right onto his head. He stood into the floor mirror and examined his appearance. Kelly gave him a disapproving look as she lifted Pierre onto their bed. Their son didn’t seem to mind as he was mindlessly curling his legs and sucking on his fingers.

“It’s going to be cold tonight, you’ll need more than that.”, she scolded. “Take a scarf and some gloves.”

Tobias shuffled back into the closet to retrieve his scarf and gloves, but he couldn't shake the anticipation making his fingers tremble. He wrapped the scarf around his neck and pulled the gloves over his fingers. Kelly seemed pleased as she came up from behind to give her husband a tight, endearing hug. Her face was shielded into the crook of his neck as Tobias smiled. He could feel her tiredness in her posture, but her warm body against his momentarily paused his trembling.

"I love you.", she whispered. "I love you so much."

Tobias bit the inside of his cheek to keep himself from tearing up. Throughout their marriage, they had their ups and inevitable downs, but never once did their love for each other dwindle. The debts, scathing hours they worked, and the dedication needed to run their household left them drained, sometimes apathetic to each other's needs. In moments like these, no matter how intimate they were, Tobias felt at ease.

"I'll be home later.", he assured.

Kelly untangled her arms from around her husband and went to the bed to attend their son. Pierre's restlessness stilled as the child had begun to doze off. Tobias came over to give their son a kiss onto his forehead, then he deftly snuck out the room. He last saw Kelly wrapping Pierre into his baby blanket and going towards the crib. One of the lasting, loving memories he kept of Kelly and Pierre days after.

He took his car before parking in an undisclosed section of Baltimore he found too familiar. The air was bitterly cold. The streets were decrepit while the sidewalks were haven to the vagabonds and rats alike. People assembled onto their front porches for drinks, the would-be card games, and warming cigarettes. The buildings had their fair share of wear-and-tear, but it was the atmosphere that kept Tobias on his toes. Through his policework, he had adapted to environments out of his comfort zone, in particular, the environments that would chew him out. Underneath his guise, he was shielded from wandering eyes, but there was still eyes that kept their stares for far too long than what the officer would've liked.

He retrieved the letter from his pocket and unfolded it. He read the address over and kept his eyes wary to the buildings and their respective numbers. It was several more blocks he wandered until he discovered the address; an apartment building far more kept than the surrounding complexes. Tobias looked up to only to find each unit was darkened -- a worrisome observation, but nevertheless, he entered the complex. Downstairs, there was only a handful of units that looked occupied in the vast, open greenery. Tobias took note of the personal decorations outside each door; lawn chairs, tables, and the occasional welcome mat. His target's unit was upstairs, and Tobias stalked upstairs, careful not to trigger the motion lights around him. Once on the second floor, Tobias was staring down the unit.

He was beyond nervous, and the gun tucked into his waistband left a cold sting digging into his side. He molested it underneath his jacket as he took steps towards the unit. Blood rushed into his ears as they ranged with the anticipating arrival at the apartment. He'd been nervous, excited, and even scared on disturbance calls, the occasional robbery, and even shoot outs, but never had he been so stricken. He drilled a comforting mantra to himself as the apartment was now a hand's reach away.

He knocked, softly, then it became louder with each repetitive knock. He stood back with the gun now unholstered from his waistband, finger dangerously on the trigger, and his eyes steeled. However, it was long, passing minutes till Tobias heard footsteps coming to the door. He stepped back as the doorknob slowly turned and the door creaked open. Tobias had to hold his breath as the stench that wafted from the apartment gagged him. It smelled of dirt and murk, like rain in the cemetery. He grimaced as the door was fully open, but the apartment was as dark as the night inside. In the doorway, a child, no older than their puberty years, stood sleepily with her arms caressed around a pillow. Tobias was quick to sheathe his gun as the young girl looked up at him with lidded eyes.

“Oh hello.”, Tobias greeted, braving a smile onto his face. “My name is Officer Budge – I’m sorry to wake you, but are your parents’ home?”

The girl nodded and pointed towards the hallway where a soft, white-blue light glowed. She gazed at Tobias and there was a chillness in her stare, almost a knowing, omnipotent look peering past him. Tobias swallowed as the child stepped to the side. He stepped inside the apartment with his nose scrunched and waited for the girl to lead the way. She closed the door behind them and reached onto her tippy-toes for the light switch. Once the apartment was lit, Tobias was alerted to the creaking sounds coming from another room. He instinctively guarded himself, but the young girl paced towards the light at the end of the hallway. He waited until the young girl whipped her head around with those big, hauntingly deep brown eyes focused on him. He made his way towards the girl as the living room was in a disarray; magazines, books, and toys scattered amongst the room. The wallpaper had been peeled to reveal the drywall underneath in some spots and the hardwood flooring needed a good polishing. Tobias stood where the little girl stood next to a recliner with a man, old and shriveled, sat in front of the television.

The old man was hunched over a dinner tray, empty saved for a plastic pouch, and he had to be thrice the age of Tobias. His body was frail, his limbs elongated, and Tobias couldn’t make much of his face out except for the deep, riveting wrinkles furrowing on his face. Wisps of silvery-blonde hair grew in clumps and the clothes the man was wearing hardly covered him as he was much to slender to fulfill them. His toenails had curled into raking scythes against the hardwood floor, and Tobias kept his disgust hidden behind a polite smile. The little girl, on the other hand, was unfazed and seemingly loving towards the old man, which Tobias assumed as her grandfather, as she pulled more of the blanket across his willowy legs.

“Excuse me.”, Tobias attempted at an introduction. “My name is Officer Budge. Are you on the lease, sir?”

The old man said nothing, but kept his eyes fixated onto the television. The little girl sat her pillow down and came to the other side of the older man, standing again on her tippy-toes, and moving some of the clumped hair away from his dangling earlobes. Her small lips began to make out words and once she stepped away, the old man slowly turned his head to Tobias. His expression was of weariness, but he seemed coherent. He made an open-mouthed smile and Tobias was taken back by the gnarly, misshapen set of teeth the old man had. The officer cleared his throat just as the little girl came back over to stand by his side. The old man went back to looking at the television and Tobias was at a complete lost.

“He can’t hear, Mr. Officer.”, the girl said, pointing out how the old man wasn’t receptive to what was being said on the television. “He’s too old. He can’t hear Mama either.”

Tobias took note, but he was startled to a loud crashing noise coming from behind him. He spun around with his hand jutting to his firearm. The little girl was surprised by his reaction and had scurried to the other side of the older man. She cowered underneath the recliner’s arm as Tobias was hyperaware and trigger-happy. From the hallway, he caught the glimpse of sheet-white legs step from another room. The legs were attached to an equally pale, slender body, and Tobias kept himself guarded. There stood a woman, nude except for her chest, in the hallway with her body painfully twisted forward. The officer saw her deep, amber eyes glow underneath snake-like tendrils of hair. The little girl and the old man had turned their heads towards the woman in the hallway as she flexed her long, nail-like fingers outwards.

“Oh no, you have to go.”, the girl warned, pointing towards the woman in the hallway. “Mama’s awake.”

The officer was rightfully alarmed as he made distance between himself, the woman in the hallway, and the little girl with the old man. He hoisted his gun ahead of him with his finger onto the trigger. Time slowed and there was an immeasurable sharpness in Tobias’s focus. He pointed it towards the woman, just as the old man had made an agonizing, painful squeal out from the back of his throat. The little girl was silent, saved for her lips trembling, and Tobias was cornered.

The old man fell forward and made a ‘thump’ as he landed on the floor. He contorted upwards as his limbs were jutted out. A sickening, wet crunch of bones echoed in the living room as the old man was now upright, his head twisted all the way around towards Tobias, and his mouth agape. Horrific as the transformation was from a dreary, fragile old man to an unnatural monster, the old man was as frightening as the woman haunting the hallway. Tobias kept his focus, but he kept his wavering composure towards the woman that was in the hallway was in the living room with her mouth open to reveal long, pearly fangs curving out from her gums. They curled and prickled at the bottom of her lip, but as abnormally long they were, they were surprisingly beautiful.

“Stay back.”, Tobias warned. “I’m an officer of the law and I will shoot!”

His warning fell on uncaring ears as the woman stalked amongst the clutter of the living room. Her fangs dripped with thick globs of saliva just as the old man was circling around them. She threw her head back and Tobias heard the crunch of her neckbones cracking, but he was not to be frightened away by the horrors in front of him.

It wasn’t until the old man launched at an unnatural speed did the officer fire, the bullet ringing out in the apartment like a whistling spear. It made its home into the old man’s chest cavity and the loudest, shrillest cry erupted from his lips. He was taken aback and writhed on the floor as the slender woman made a weak, coo-like noise from her throat. Her face diminished from rage into moroseness.

Tobias prepared for another shot just as the little girl ran out from the living room. The old man was gasping, crying out in pain as the bullet wound spread into a wide crevice into his chest. Blood sprayed lazily from the wound just as the old man’s cries quieted, then silence

ensued. The smell of hot ash wafted in the air as a dark, orange glow emitted from the old man then a flourish of red-orange flames came to life. The living room was ablaze in hot light and Tobias shielded his eyes. As the flames diminished, the officer watched with a look of horror as the old man became nothing more but blackened ash staining the hardwood floor. At that time, he didn't want to believe it, but he had to come to terms that he'd executed a vampire. It wasn't humanly possible for mortals to combust in flames, let alone contort their physical bodies into impossible postures. The bullets he had been given was meant not in vanquishing humankind, but vampire kind, and it was a note the officer kept for the unquestionable future. Tobias was skeptical of the supernatural until that night.

The woman made an ominous, low-toned bellow before rushing to Tobias. Her speed was impeccable, hard to focus on with the naked human eye. Her hands were out like wretched claws as she was on top of the officer. It felt as if all the air in his lungs were pressed out his lungs upon impact. Tobias felt the sheer force of the woman's pounce on top of him as they wrestled. She gnashed and scratched at Tobias who lost his gun in the scuffle but managed to keep her scythe-like claws from gravely ripping him to shreds. She was unbelievably strong for her physicality, and Tobias found himself losing the struggle. She resorted to wrenching Tobias's arms out towards his sides which earned her a strangled cry from the officer underneath her. Her amber eyes glowed like ferocious torches and it was in those eyes did Tobias saw his death. His inevitable demise wouldn't be painless, but ravenously violent and merciless.

"Did he send you to kill us?", he heard the woman's voice rasp. "Was he too proud to do it himself?"

Tobias heaved and grunted as the strength began to wither from his limbs and legs. He thought of himself in peak physical condition, but with his attacker sapping the remaining vitality out of him, he was no more but a bug squashed by a boot. The woman's claws found home into his sides which Tobias yowled in unquestionable agony. Blood began to ooze from underneath his clothes and onto the floor. They dug and dug until the officer was sure that his assailant was near tender, vulnerable organs. He threw his head back and began to cry.

In between the gnashing, lashing, and battering, Tobias was warmed with the thoughts of Kelly and Pierre sitting happily in the living room. If he were to die, he would've liked to reminiscence on his family rather than the out-of-control beast keen on murdering him.

However, his human spirit refused to suffer defeat and Tobias had mustered newfound strength. He tussled the woman over the side and her lithe frame sent her flying into a nearby bookshelf. The contents of the bookshelf fell on top of her including the bookshelf and it gave Tobias quick moments to get up, retrieve his gun, and high tailed it out towards the hallway. The little girl was cowered by the front door and Tobias thought selflessly to pick up the girl on the way out, but she kicked and screamed in his arms. He was forced to let her go as she scrambled back into the apartment with the woman, presumably her mother, now in the hallway fully composed. Amber eyes darkened into a deep, savage spite that glowed in the dark. The little girl threw one more look towards Tobias before slamming the apartment's door. The officer limped away as there was jutting, immediate pain throbbing his legs and feet.

From the balcony, he saw the apartments underneath light up as curious tenants began to shuffle out from their units. They congregated at each other's doors as Tobias escaped from the scene. His heart was beating out his chest and the adrenaline that coursed through his veins amplified the farther he got away from the apartment. He wouldn't be able to escape should the woman chase him from the apartment. Yet, he was able to leave the apartment complex partially unscathed and back into the safety of the bustling street. He hobbled towards his parked car as blood trailed behind him like a flowing cape.

He was losing consciousness with the amount of blood rushing from his sides as he struggled to unlock the car, and he finally collapsed into the seat. His hands fumbled with his keys just as his chest felt unbelievably tight. Blotches appeared in his vision and nausea rolled in waves. It took the remaining ounce of strength possessed for him to start the car and speed off, but it was an ill-attempt as shortly after, he was forced to pull off onto the side of the road. He hardly could grip the wheel. His breathing became shallow, desperate huffs and the oxygen that managed to filter into his lungs burned bitterly. His vision was beginning to fail and the last of the adrenaline had dried. Shock was settling in, but Tobias kept his best to remain conscious. He last remembered looking over towards the passenger side where he kept a photo of his family plastered onto the glovebox.

He awoke again, but in a state of confusion, as his eyes were blinded by glaring white beams. He was on his back, achingly so, and the air smelled of cleanliness. His body ached as he tried to understand where he was as the beeping of monitors echoed around him. He propped himself up slowly as the jutting pain from his torso and appendages made it evidently clear he was injured. The room he was now in was stark white, ceremonially sterile, and reminiscent of a hospital suite. Even the door was white, except for the door handle, but it was unsettling. However, it couldn't have been a hospital room given there was long, velvety curtains cascading the windows, and lack of nurses.

Tobias grimaced. He pulled the blanket from across his body and found it to be in a state of repair; cleanly wrapped bandages and stints in place. He was attached to a drip, amongst the many other machines, and his breathing was secured by the oxygen filing into his nose. He didn't know where he was, and he needed desperately to contact his wife. He attempted to swing his legs over onto the cool, tiled floor, but sharp pain stabbed his muscles. He remained pressed against the bed. He scanned the room, eyeing the lack of décor except for the closed curtains, and he sighed. Stripped to his nudity, bandaged, and still cloudy from his injuries, he was at the mercy of whoever was responsible in healing him. The door had begun to click, and Tobias was alerted to the arrival of strangers.

They were dressed in the cleanly white that the room was decorated in, with equally pale skin, and darkened eyes. The group shuffled in with clipboards pressed into their manicured hands, and whispers amongst them was deaf upon Tobias's ringing ears. The officer was wary of their arrival, but remained neutral as the group of what he could only guess to be nurses began to make notes of his condition onto their clipboards. One nurse, a young woman, pulled her mask down to reveal her rouge lips, a stark contrast to her alabaster skin, and Tobias was reminded of the woman who attacked him in the apartment. He swallowed and curled his fingers into the mattress underneath him, earning himself a cautious glance from

the nurse, and she stood away from the officer. The other two nurses; males, began to take inventory on the state of Tobias's bandages, some beginning to stain.

Tobias opened his mouth to speak, but with his throat being as parched as it was, only a strangled gasp came out. The nurses took note of his attempt at conversation, but resumed their meticulous care, and the officer was left at the mercy of their observative eyes and cold hands. Behind them all, the hauntingly tall figure Tobias had grown to dread came into view as Hannibal's familiar smirk plastered across his face. As Hannibal came in, the nurses respectfully made their leave and it was him and Tobias in the room. The Prince grabbed a chair nearby and slowly, painstakingly slow dragged the chair across the room, earning a frown from the officer. Hannibal sat down and fixed his suit and his smirk didn't disappear from his face until he spoke.

"It's a good thing we found you, Tobias.", the Prince admitted. "I was afraid that you were injured grievously, if not dead."

"Sorry to disappoint.", the officer said callously, feeling the way his ribs ached as he spoke. "I'm much harder to kill."

"Don't think of yourself that highly, Officer Budge, anyone can be killed.", Hannibal counterargued. "Including me."

Tobias scoffed and felt more jutting pain on both sides. Making conversation was painful, physically and mentally, as Tobias had to go through the hoops deciphering Hannibal's cryptic personality. He glared at Hannibal who seemed elated at Tobias's improving condition. The officer was still in pain and his wounds bled, but Hannibal kept his optimism plastered across his lips. Yet, there was something different about him, almost like the façade was dropping to reveal his true face. The officer was receptive to body language and the seemingly coldness radiating off Hannibal told him that this wasn't a friendly visit. Tobias's cautiousness proved true as Hannibal's often polite smile became a dreadful, thinly pressed frown creasing his face. He crossed his legs and kept his hands in his lap, seemingly for his own sake, and Tobias took a deep inhale from his nose.

"I'm afraid my tenants were too troublesome for you to evict.", Hannibal said as he pointed out Tobias's bandaged physique. "On my behalf, I apologize."

"For all the trouble, I've arranged for a more personal removal of them off my premises."

Tobias began to bite the insides of his cheeks at Hannibal's attempt of an apology, but he knew better. For all he knew, Hannibal sent him straight into the fray just to get rid of him. However, Tobias had mounting doubts that Hannibal, for the most part, knew of his tenants' unearthly nature, or he himself was a vampire. The officer couldn't formulate his accusation in his current state, but his glare was unwavering just as Hannibal's own stare grew heinous.

"Would you like to know what has happened since you've been asleep?", Hannibal inquired. "It's been quite an eventful night."

Tobias stiffened and felt his throat threatening to constrict. The monitor responsible for overseeing his vitals chirped enthusiastically as his pulse became erratic the longer Hannibal

kept his eyes narrowed at him. Many thoughts flooded Tobias including the despicable of them all; injury caused to Kelly or Pierre. He wanted to believe, or beg every power in the universe, that Hannibal didn't lay a finger onto his family, and the more Tobias dreadfully mulled over the condition of his family did his heart race. The Prince took notice of the monitor and reached to silence the blaring alarms.

"Tell me.", choked Tobias." Is my family okay? Please tell me they are okay."

Hannibal shrugged his shoulders. He snapped his fingers and the nurses from before, save for the female one, came back into the room with one of them holding a tablet in his hands. He handed it to the Prince who flipped open the cover, tapped on the screen for several moments, and then showed it to Tobias.

It was a house – his house, wrapped in police tape with sirens and lights blaring out in the front yard. There was blood and lots of it dripping from the porch and onto the asphalt. News vans surrounded the house as if it was flies swarming on a would-be feast. Tobias shoved the tablet away from him and caused it to clatter on the floor. Hannibal had pressed his lips into his infamous scowl as he reached down for it. The officer couldn't contain his misery as hot tears drooled down his cheeks.

"I'd admit, I had high hopes for you.", Hannibal delivered the tablet back to the attending nurse. "But you forced my hand and I had to clean the mess."

Tobias lurched forward, startling the nurses in the room, but as he went forward, Hannibal caught him. The breath in his chest exhaled in a noisily gasp as the Prince's grasp constricted the life from him. Unbelievably strong, though very restrained as Hannibal wasn't tense in his hold, rather, he gauged his grip by the officer's strained breaths. The officer felt cinderblocks weigh his chest down as he was forced deeper into the hospital bed. Hannibal leaned over him with a glare that made Tobias turn inside out.

In that stare, he saw death incarnated.

"Now, now Tobias.", teased the Prince. "You need to keep your composure for the detectives."

"You wouldn't want that kind of attention, hm?"

The officer struggled to find his breath as Hannibal pinned him there. However, a thousand unpleasant thoughts about his family's whereabouts fueled him. He grabbed Hannibal's wrist and squeezed, digging his shortened nails into the willowy skin. He didn't draw blood and his fingertips became cold.

"Listen to me, my dear friend.", the Prince said, his voice as soothing as nails on a chalkboard. "It's very important that you listen to me as this pertains to your family."

"—What?", Tobias questioned as Hannibal's hand began to alleviate from his chest. "My family—"

Before Tobias could finish his thought, the Prince was over him, deathly close to his exposed neck and the familiar prick Tobias felt before pierced his skin. He seethed and tightened as the monitor registering his heart rhythm became a shrill crescendo. Hannibal's breath was cold, unnaturally so, and the his fangs sunk hard into the officer's flesh. Tobias winced and shriveled as the strength in his appendages evaporated and his mind was drawing to a blank. The Prince was humming as he drunk from the officer underneath him, but Tobias only found himself dozing into a dreamless slumber.

When Tobias woke again, he was blinded by bright lights and the smell of hot coffee wafted up his nose. He was chilly, but he was redressed into a nicer shirt he didn't own. Around him, he was surrounded by white. Down by his hands, however, was a colder cup of coffee. Across from him was an officer; familiar. Officer Rodriguez, his partner on a week-to-week basis. However, his normally friendly demeanor was solemn and Tobias read the dread suffocating the room. Officer Budge straightened himself and braced himself for his ultimate fear.

"Tobias.", Rodriguez said. "It's not good."

Tobias pushed the cold coffee away from him and crossed his arms. He felt unrestrained by his unbridled rage he was building against Hannibal, but he couldn't piece together the night, let alone tell Officer Rodriguez what Hannibal pressured him into. His concern was his family, or dreadfully, their fates.

"Just…", Tobias responded with a heavy sigh. "Tell it to me straight."

Officer Rodriguez pinched the bridge of his nose.

"We found Kelly in the living room, blood everywhere, nothing stolen.", the fellow officer regretfully told Tobias. "We haven't found a suspect, or have we located your son."

"We're investigating it as a kidnapping."

The world slowed, cracked, then shattered all in the span of seconds as Tobias's worst fear became reality. The corners of his lips began to twitch before drooping into a long frown, then agape in a muffled cry into his shoulder. The tears fell and stained his shirt all while Officer Rodriguez stood up, and came to his side. The burly man wrapped his arm around Tobias as he silently wept. From the door, another officer stepped inside adjoined by a detective; Harvey Shrew. They greeted Rodriguez and passed along their condolences to Tobias. Detective Shrew placed a file down onto the table just as the officer joining him made his exit. Officer Budge eyed the manila folder with mounting suspicion.

Rodriguez took his seat across the table again while Detective Shrew stood behind him. Tobas didn't know much about Harvey Shrew other than his petulance and often uncouth way of performing detective work. As many cases as Shrew concluded, it wasn't without his uncanny methods. The last person Shrew wanted to cross-examine was Tobias as he had an eye for when he was being challenged. Yet, Shrew was silent as Rodriguez began to go over the folder in front of them. Inside, pictures of Tobias's home, now cluttered and destroyed

with blood splatters. He feigned his eyes away from the carnage as pictures of Kelly were brought up; her condition being far too horrific for her husband to see.

“Do you have any enemies, Tobias?”, Shrew questioned, leaning over Rodriguez’s shoulder to view the photos. “Anyone that wants to do you harm?

His angular nose crinkled as every photograph became more visceral than the next. Officer Budge kept his eyes to the ceiling as the photographs were cycled like cards. He couldn’t stomach it any longer and he felt the bubbling bile creeping up his esophagus. He swallowed and glared back to Detective Shrew.

“Of course I do, Harvey. I’m a police officer for goodness sake.”, he gritted. “As do you, Rodriguez, and every other goddamn cop in this precinct.”

Rodriguez stopped flipping through the photos and tucked them back into the manila folder. He cusped his hands together on the desk as Detective Shrew frowned.

“Look, we just need a motive.”, Shrew said. “I know this isn’t easy for you right now, buddy, but unless you give us the bait, the fish won’t hook.”

Tobias scoffed under his breath. Hannibal was ultimately to blame for the destruction of his family, and knowing him, he had Rodriguez and Detective Shrew in his pocket. He couldn’t bring himself to cry anymore, but only he seethe and harbor the vengeance he was going to unleash onto Hannibal. However, his heart did wallow in dread knowing that somewhere out in the dark, and dreary his son was in the clutches of someone evil.

“We’ll give you some time. As for procedure, we’ll be suspending you till the investigation is concluded.”, Detective Shrew gestured for Rodriguez to follow him outside of the interrogation room. The other officer did as he was instructed and offered more condolences towards Tobias.

Suspension.

Tobias grimaced and chewed his bottom lip. As many hours of grueling work he gave to the precinct, he was betrayed once again by their incompetence and their pandering to the likes of Hannibal. He couldn’t have been a suspect, not when he knew he wasn’t at the crime scene, and who knows how long Kelly and Pierre had been assaulted before Tobias had been abducted by Hannibal.

Alone, Tobias allowed himself to mourn without interference, or bombarding questions. He must’ve sat in at the table for many hours as when he alleviated himself from his sorrow, the hands of the clock above him were past several hours. He was drowsy beyond measure, and his stomach had begun to grumble. He crossed his arms ahead of him and lowered his head. He was going to be in the precinct for the rest of the night, unless he was to be abducted again, and when he woke up again, he hoped it was just a nightmare.

It was moments later Tobias was startled to the rapping against the one-way mirror. He shot a glance to the darkened window to find a figure; long, slender, and menacing, looking at him from behind the glass. Although the room outside the mirror was dark, a pair of menacingly

rouge eyes glared at him, unnervingly so, and Tobias instinctively rose from his seat. He felt gooseflesh prick his arms just as his breath felt tight in his chest. He didn't need to name whom the eyes belonged to as the interrogation room suddenly felt cold. The interrogation room suddenly went dark and Tobias yelped.

Behind the glass, the room lightened, and Tobias felt dread wash over him once before. Hannibal stood in front of the glass with a smirk so twisted, not even Tobias could itch it out from his memory. He stood there in all of his glory, and terror, and Officer Budge began to pray a dozen different prayers under his breath. Yet, his prayers were left exhaled as in the Prince's arms was a child, *his* child, breathing, untouched, still innocent. Pierre, with his darkened curls and portly arms, clung onto Hannibal like he would do to Tobias, or Kelly. He had been changed into a winter coat and matching pants. His little ears were covered by earmuffs. He was uninjured, at least from Tobias' point of view, and seemingly unfazed by the monster holding him. Hannibal held him closely to his chest just as Pierre began to fidget with his pocket square.

The Prince tapped the glass again in an agonizingly slow rhythm.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Tobias' nostrils flared and he was soon charging towards the one-way mirror to bang helplessly at the glass. Even in the dark, he could make out Hannibal like a hawk does to her prey. The sudden noise startled Pierre who clung tighter onto the Prince and Hannibal began to turn away. Tobias had devolved into sobs and snot dribbled from his nose like lazy raindrops.

"Stop!", he begged, banging harder onto the one-way mirror. "Don't take my son away from me!"

"I'll take care of sweet Pierre.", he heard the vampire announce. He smiled at Pierre, who began to whine and grow discontent in the vampire's arms, and then back to Tobias.

"As you should've done as his *father*."

Hannibal turned away from the glass and Pierre buried his curls into his shoulder. It felt like his heart was being pulled from his chest with burning tongs. Tobias couldn't do anything but yell and turn his fists bloody as the mirror wouldn't give way while Hannibal and Pierre became distant. The lights flickered above them and once again, Hannibal and Pierre were obscured by shadowy darkness. On his side of the room, the lights warmed and became searing white above him.

He could only wail as he slid down to his knees. Hannibal was gone, along with Pierre, and Kelly. Had he known he played fiddle with the devil, he would've never joined the quartet. Hannibal broken him, stole his family, and left Tobias scarred and angry. He didn't register Detective Shrew or Officer Rodriguez returning into the interrogation room in a hurry, or did he register being dragged out the room, but he did remember the smirk upon Hannibal's curved lips.

Officer Budge sighed as the last of his paperwork was stacked high onto his desk. The hour was late, far later than what he'd imagined the time would be. The moon had begun to creep from the shuttered blinds of the precinct. He stretched from side to side before rising from his swivel chair. Like a ball and chain being alleviated from his ankle, he was free to roam the precinct with his nightly work completed. However, he was alerted to Officer Rodriguez waltzing in with coffee and presumably dinner tucked under his arm.

He beamed when he saw Tobias nearby and sat his coffee and deliciously fragrant to-go dinner onto the desk.

"Dinner?", the officer asked, pushing the plastic to-go container closer to Tobias.

Officer Budge respectfully declined. He wanted nothing more than a good night's rest rather than reminiscing over chow mein and coffee. Officer Rodriguez shrugged his shoulder and picked up the to-go container. The phone sitting on Tobias' desk shrilled with an incoming call. He rolled his eyes and reluctantly answered.

"Hello?", Tobias asked. "This is Officer Budge with precinct nine."

The line was silent except for humming, and Tobias was about t hang up the phone till he heard a click. He listened closely as something in the background hummed.

"Lord, I pray now that you give me strength in battle. That I might overcome the hordes of Satan and his children. That I might wield the flaming sword of the archangel and defend myself with your shield of faith. And that my victories are many and my wounds few. That I might further your kingdom here on earth. And if I meet death tonight, then let it be first that I cast a mighty host of demons back into the lake of fire whence they came. And then rest finally in the light of your glory. Amen.", the recorded voice uttered like a well-rehearsed mantra.

"What are you talking about?", interrogated Tobias. "Who is this?"

"Seek us when you're strong, Tobias. We'll rid Baltimore of the blight that is *him* and all *his* fiends. Let God show you the path to righteous and may your blade be His vengeance."

The line clicked dead and Tobias held the receiver in utter shock, and downright confusion. For a prank call, it was unnerving and left gooseflesh up Tobias' arms. He wasn't a religious fanatic, or did he entertain the prattling of madmen, but he couldn't help thinking about the specifics of the message. And the call held much higher vocabulary than what a disgruntled preteen mad at authority could utter.

Of him.

The only fiend Tobias knew of was Hannibal, and he was more than a devil dressed in a fine suit. Hannibal was the most vile, diabolical, self-serving excuse of a man, and Tobias would torture him a thousand different ways if he could. Ultimately, Tobias wanted to kill Hannibal for all the suffering he'd unleashed upon his family, and he wanted to make Hannibal *hurt*. He wanted his son back. He couldn't have his family again, but he could salvage what was left of it. Hannibal held his only son hostage, and as far as he knew, Pierre was safe if Tobias

stayed his distance. If there was some unknown, shadowy force out there plotting Hannibal's usurpation than Tobias was more than willing to pick up the sword. For all he knew, his life had been forfeited the moment he signed his name to Hannibal; like Dr. Faust did with Mephistopheles. He had nothing left to inherit, but the chance to have his son in his arms again armed him with the ammunition to slay Hannibal.

Officer Rodriguez watched his fellow officer as he ate his to-go dinner. Tobias looked over at him as he returned the receiver to the base of the phone.

"Prank call.", the officer lied. "Kids…"

"As usual.", Officer Rodriguez closed his to-go tray. "They have nothing better to do but be a menace."

Tobias faked a chuckle as he gathered his bag and coat. He gave Rodriguez a pat to his burly shoulder as he made way to leave the precinct. With work completed for the night, he had many hours to mull over his next approach. Much needed to be planned and Tobias wasn't going to be as gullible as he was before. Hannibal couldn't be outfoxed, that he learned many months ago, and he needed more than bullets to maim a vampire. Time, preparation, and the right allies in his corner would yield him the demise he desperately fantasized for the Prince of Baltimore. If he were to fail, his life would end as he knew it. Yet, the overbearing want to rescue Pierre from that monster's grasp motivated him, along with the memory of his wife, and his life to return to somewhat of normalcy. He couldn't fail his son in his endeavors, and by whatever spiritual force out there was rooting for him, he was going to bring his son home.

Unless he was destined to be a failure of a father once more.

Chapter End Notes

> Have you or your family been personally victimized by Hannibal Lecter? You may be obligated to receive compensation for your pain and suffering.

Wonder Child

Chapter Summary

Will is attacked on his way to dinner.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for violence. Please continue with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XIX

"Wonder Child"

Will startled himself awake. He rose to find that he was alone, much to his disappointment, with Alana not within sight. Her smell lingered, however, and it was of sweetness tinged with decay. He didn't expect her to stay around – she seemed to have a knack for disappearing and reappearing at the most inconvenient of times. However, it was good to know she had eyes on welfare, to an extent. After all, her sire was still a Baron of Baltimore, and damn-near a lapdog for the Prince.

He rubbed his eyes as sleep made them heavy in drowsiness. He rose from his unearthly position on the couch and his feet curled coldly against the floor underneath him. He was dead, but coldness still prickled at his skin.

I'm not as dead as I thought.

Will padded across the room for his shoes and slipped his chilled feet inside. He must've slept long as the hands of the clock was well past midnight; the waxing moon outside his window gargantuan and overseeing. Brian hadn't returned from haunting Baltimore as far as Will knew. He'd expected that much from the Anarch as it seemed his alignment ushered his attentions elsewhere. Will sighed.

He didn't know what to do for the night other than wait around for someone either to find him or try to beat him up. The latter made the few wounds he was still nursing ache painfully. His battle scars mended on their own accord with the proper rest and quenched thirst. He began to mull over Brian's invitation to *The Last Call*.

Brian was his only trusted friend and he gave the Anarch all the credit. He hardly knew of Anarchs or their movement, but they hated Hannibal as much as Will did. The Brujah always spoke highly of the Anarchs – at least, the few Will knew of; Matthew and Freddie. He remembered Matthew especially as he was the one not afraid to challenge Hannibal on that stage and Will still thought of him beautifully. He didn't think it could hurt to meet the Anarchs, at least on friendly grounds, and he needed to network if Baltimore was going to be a familiar place for him. They could teach him better in regards to his vampiric lifestyle as without his sire, it was like wadding through the dark. The voices, normally chattering up a storm by now, was seemingly in a silent agreement with Will's plan.

However, the pressing concern of the Prince's summoning left Will in a hard place. The computer chiming nearby reminded him. He could disobey, of course, and run the risk of being abducted, or better, staked in his chest. Or, he could simply visit the Prince and be dined, wined, and maybe for dessert, staked in the throat. Will felt nothing but contempt as he weighed his options. His decision came at the blaring sound of a car horn downstairs and Will looked out the apartment window to see a familiar, brightly colored cab haunting underneath a streetlight. He grimaced as he recognized the cab driver from before with a cigarette curled with ash.

There was no escaping the cab driver, and Will left the apartment begrudgingly. The street was empty except for the occasional stray cat, drunk loiter, and the miasma of something foul in the air. Will crossed the street and opened the cab door. Inside, his nostrils were assaulted with the overbearing stench of tobacco and he shielded his nose. The cab driver flicked his cigarette out the window and returned his hand to the steering wheel. From behind his darkened shades, his eye gleamed at the fledgling. Will looked at the cab driver with a frown.

"Where to, fledgling?", the cab driver rasped.

"Somewhere far away from here.", flatly replied Will.

The cab driver smirked with a mouthful of canines. The fledgling crossed his arms and casted his eyes out the window. The cab pulled off into a steady acceleration as the cab driver drove. Later in the ride, the radio became overwhelming in recalling the nightly broadcast that Will felt as if his ears would begin to bleed. The voices in his head that would drum their distorted, psychosis-filled manifestos was unnervingly silent. Will felt discomforted from the fact his mind wasn't chattering up a storm – it was one of his many instincts warning him of the inevitable bad ending he'd grown accustomed to in Baltimore.

Something is wrong.

He couldn't pinpoint the reason for his anxiety, but he knew he didn't like it. Will felt himself chewing on the soft flesh of his inner cheek with his fangs. His hands couldn't help but fidget with the seatbelt across his breast. He didn't like to feel this anxious. The cab driver reached for the radio to turn up the volume which sent Will into a sickening spiral of wanting to dry-heave, followed by thrashing his head bloody against the window, and ending with him forcing the cab to crash. His fantasized trauma came to an abrupt halt just as the noise in his head resumed to the softened whispers that normally haunted him.

The cab driver had driven Will most the distance to Hannibal's tower, until the fledgling grew frustrated and demanded for him to stop. The cab driver did as he was told, rightfully, and Will got out of the cab in a fury. He slammed the car door behind him and evaded the several cars passing in the opposite lanes. They honked their horns angrily as Will forced them to slow, but the fledgling could care less. He wanted out that cab, and as far away from Hannibal's tower. The cab waited for brief moments, perhaps longer than what it was supposed to, before pulling back into ongoing traffic.

In the middle of Baltimore, Will was in a hurry to find anything remotely familiar, an alleyway, building, or a landmark. He walked the streets fastidiously as people bumped into him along the way. He heard all their remarks and curses under their frigid breaths. Their heartbeats, some slowed, others raging, buzzed in Will's ears like cicadas at dusk. His hunger made his stomach churn, but he had to make distance between the Prince's domain and himself. He must've walked an extensive amount as the buildings degraded from the pristine and proper, to the familiar desolate and slum-like scenery he was used to. Abandoned husks of cars, worn-down apartments, and overgrown playgrounds home to the criminal element was present on this side of town. From all sides, strange eyes and cautious lips watched him stalk down the sidewalk.

The stares on Will's back burned him, but he couldn't meet them all. The glimpses of apparitions, some real while others imagined, ogled from behind curtains, around the alleyways, and under porches. His eyes scanned the walls and of their graffiti for the sign the Brujah had tattooed on his skin. He saw everything else, but the sign, and Will felt like bashing his head in. He turned into a nearby alleyway slick with grime and crossed onto another street. The result was the same; graffiti, but not a single 'A' in sight. Will crossed his arms as he stood on the corner of the newest street. Across the street, an empty field of dirt encaged by barbed wire met him, and to his back was a dilapidated business of sorts. He grimaced and took a moment to think. If he knew of how territories worked, the Anarchs would be the furthest away from Hannibal. Given Will's lack of knowledge of Baltimore's many hoods and suburbs, he was left at a standstill.

He thought to return the way he came from and reroute. Baltimore was a decent sized city, but it wasn't an endless concrete jungle either.

Will turned around on his heels, but the impact of something *heavy* against his back had him stumbling forward. Had he had breath in his chest, he was sure it was exhaled by the force, but he didn't have time to recover as another blow sent him straight onto his knees. The concrete underneath him was unyielding and his joints felt the harshness of it. He snapped his head around towards the source of the brute force, yet he was too slowed to react as stronger, unearthly strength had him off his knees, and into the air. He landed *hard* onto his back. Will's mind raced a thousand different thoughts as his body kicked into overdrive to defend himself. He opened his mouth to yell and he felt himself being wretched backwards to the alleyway. He kicked, thrashed, and howled bloody murder and he was whacked once more.

Whack.

Blood dribbled out his mouth and nose. Disoriented, there was blackness obscuring his vision as he was down on his back. Above him, the darkened grey clouds of the sky threatened to send forth the rain. He smiled unknowingly to himself at the thought of rain, until the clouds were replaced by a strange, gargantuan figure of a beast on top of him. Will furrowed his brows as the glaring orange eyes pinned on top of him became closer till, he seethed in the weight being dropped onto his chest. Either side of his body was framed by large knees just as Will was beginning to recognize what struck him; a lead pipe now stained rouge with his blood.

The beast wielding the pipe was not a beast with horns, wings, or a tail, but of a man scarred and tattooed like the graffiti on the walls around them. He was thrice the size of Will with a belly that hung over his belted pants. His skin was of a grey-blue tone, and orange eyes shined in ferociousness. Will's blood frothed in his mouth as he hiccupped in excruciating pain.

"Don't fuck him up too much.", Will heard a gnarly, strained voice from above him. "I heard the Prince likes them *pretty*."

His eyes lifted towards his skull to see another man; lanky, with dreadlocks trailing down his chest, and the same number of sprawling tattoos over him. His eyes were of a blue hue, but they glowed like flaming orbs in the night. The attacker above him nodded at the other man's request and opened his mouth to smile toothily at the fledgling underneath his massive weight.

Will couldn't help but grow ill seeing the misshapen, yellowed teeth in his attacker's mouth. However, when the pipe came across his face, he only felt more pain. His teeth shook, and he was sure one or two had been knocked loose. Stars shined in his vision and he couldn't move his head any longer. Like a dozen different drums sounding off in his ears, Will only heard his blood thump around.

He felt a hand underneath his chin forcing him to look up into his would-be-killer's eyes. Being in this position was all too familiar to his former life. He had grown used to the beatings, the eventual assault, and the aftermath that came with it. However, when he looked into the orange eyes above him, he saw nothing but unadulterated sadism. The blood flowing from his mouth, nose, and now from his head obscured his vision in red. His eyes began to flutter close just as he made out the lead pipe coming down to strike him again.

Pop.

Will opened his eyes as he saw the lead pipe fly forward, followed by his attacker launching himself up off him. As the world moved in slow motion, Will watched the scene unfold in front of him in a daze.

Pop.

Hot, searing liquid splashed over him as his attacker was riddled with a bullet hole in his stomach. Bellowing over, his attacker hurled dark, sanguine-colored blood and the other attacker in front of them had shouted something unintelligible to Will's deafened ears. The

fledgling couldn't make out the carnage happening, but the larger attacker was shot again, but this time instead of blood spraying, it was his orange-tinted ashes dusting over Will.

Pop.

The other attacker must've tried to flee, but to no avail, as the last gunshot rung out and more ash glowed in the alleyway. A strangled gurgle passed in the wind and weight clunked to the ground. Will was still on the ground by the time he was starting to come to. His mind hadn't registered the events unfolding ahead of him by the time he felt himself being lifted up by his arms and he was upright again. Blood trickled off his face down into his lap as his eyes couldn't seem to stay open for too long.

"Hey, kid.", the voice was familiar, but Will had no name for it. "Look at me."

With his remaining strength, Will forced himself to look towards the direction of the voice. In front of him, a tall, slender man dressed in bright red was crouched in front of him. Striking blue eyes, just like his own, was softened in concern. Brown locks was slicked behind pointed ears and Will hyper fixated on moving lips encasing elongated fangs. A gentler hand forced his chin up and Will only stared with lidded eyes.

"Are you with me, Will?", the voice was as smooth as silk to Will's ears as his hearing started to come back to him. "Blink if you can hear me."

The fledgling lazily blinked his eyes and kept them closed for a moment. All the screws in his head had been knocked around silly, and just to keep his eyes open was taxing. He wanted to lay back down against the slick concrete, but the hand keeping his chin up also had another against his soiled back. Will mumbled something under his breath just as his eyes opened once more.

He knew of the man in front of him, not as Brian, but as Matthew with his fiercely beautiful eyes shined like glassy seafoam. Matthew was looking at him in worry, like Brian often did whenever Will came home battered, and it was a look Will saw too often these days.

"Brian would kill me if you died.", Matthew said in relief. He began to help the fledgling back up to his feet.

"Aren't you a wonder?", Matthew began to inspect Will's injuries. He grimaced as he took notice of the gash splitting the fledgling's brow.

Will winced as he was back on his feet and he nursed his injured cheek. A flourishing purple bruise stained his cheek just as more blood lazily dribbled out of his lips. The gash on his brow throbbed mercilessly. Matthew used his own sleeve to dab away at the fledgling's mouth and Will couldn't help but warm at the interaction. It was the attentiveness of Matthew's gesture that reminded Will of the Brujah's care. He smiled but caught himself feeling like he was going to fall over. Matthew was much quicker and caught Will by his shoulder.

"What were you doing out here in Sabbat territory, fledgling?", asked the Anarch, seemingly concerned on how Will couldn't stay upright without his help.

Sabbat.

Will didn't know of that word, or what it entailed. Whether it was another breed of vampire, or affiliation, Will would have to learn of it later. He wanted nothing more but to lay down, without another incident. He shrugged and Matthew had him lean against the brick wall nearby. Ashes shuffled underneath their feet and blew away with a cooling breeze.

"Looking for…", the fledgling started but lost himself just as he spat another glob of blood down to the ground. "a sign."

Matthew crossed his arms as he eyed the fledgling. Will couldn't piece his vocabulary together, not with his head still spiraling like a mouse trapped in a wheel.

"Well, if you were lookin' for us, you're way off.", the Anarch scolded. "These Sabbat fucks would've eaten you alive."

"Thank you.", Will managed to say and blood drooled from between his lips. "I mean it."

"Yeah, yeah.", Matthew huffed. "This won't be the last time I'll be saving you."

It was true – Matthew had stalled Will's execution, and now he saved him from being beaten, if not worse, to death. Will would be forever indebted to Matthew's generosity, even more so with this encounter.

"Kid, you don't look too good.", the Anarch commented, seeing how Will was only holding himself up by sheer luck, or his adrenaline keeping him upright.

"I'm….", the fledgling began. "We're alright." He lied and the Anarch knew he was lying.

Will managed to regain his composure and wiped the rest of the blood trickling out his nose with the back of his hand. He lifted his eyes to Matthew who seemingly softened his demeanor upon realizing that Will wasn't like him, or any vampire really, and it naturally wasn't his fault his attackers pulverized him. The Anarch shied his eyes away and turned around. The fledgling saw how he cracked the Anarch's demeanor, and he saw behind the heroic persona, a morose and depressed man equipped with the world on his weary shoulders. Will made note of it as often with his imagination, he revealed the truth about people.

Will pushed himself off the wall to stand on his own. His legs still felt like iron rods, but they at least moved when he compelled them to.

"I have to go…", the fledgling admitted. "somewhere far from here."

"I can either take you back with me, or I can lead you out of this shithole.", Matthew confessed. "Your choice."

Will thought of it best to follow Matthew and the Anarch guided him out of the now bloodied, ash-littered alleyway back onto the street. To Will's dread and Matthew's surprise, the cab was idled underneath a flickering streetlight. The fledgling grimaced as he walked past the Matthew holding his cheek. The Anarch called after him, but reluctantly Will approached the cab.

“Where to?”, the cab driver asked sarcastically.

Will looked behind him to find Matthew on the sidewalk with his eyebrows raised. He wanted to join the Anarch, and to be with Brian, but the over looming threat of the Prince plucking him away deterred him. The fledgling didn’t need for Brian to be cooing over his condition again and the Prince was a more pressing matter.

“To the Prince’s tower…”, Will reluctantly replied as he grasped the cab’s door. He let himself inside and the door closed for him. He laid in the back seat as being upright made his head throb worse.

The cab silently pulled off the curb just as Will caught a glimpse of Matthew watching with his hand holstered on his gun. He cracked a smile and laid flat against the backseat. Never could he have a night without something happening to him. The cab driver kept the radio off, either for Will’s sake, or the lack of entertaining news, and the fledgling silently thanked him. Traffic was light, and the journey was without interruptions. He kept his eyes closed most of the ride, but only opened them when the cab came to a complete stop.

Will rose and found that the cab was parked outside the ominously tall gates of the Prince’s tower. He made his foot reach the cab door’s handle and the door slowly opened. He got out the best he can while his head became a cacophony of pain. The cab pulled away from the curb once Will wrapped his bloodied hands around the gate. With his might, the gate gave way and he began to stumble up the steps leading into the tower.

Inside, the lobby was empty except for the security guard, Franklyn, tapping away on the keyboard. The lights pained his eyes and Will kept his eyes casted downwards until he was upon the front desk. Franklyn was startled at Will’s entrance, and even more so as the fledgling was bloodied all the way down his face and shirt. He swallowed just as Will leaned over the counter.

“Is he in….”, Will rasped. His blood had begun to stain the marbled counter he was leaned over.

Franklyn’s bottom lip began to quiver as he watched in horror as Will sputtered blood from his lips. He nodded and grew distraught the more he watched the vampire in front of him bleed. He shakily reached for the clipboard containing the visitor slips and he reached to hand it to Will. The fledgling used his finger to sign his name haphazardly across the sheet and shuffled away from the counter.

It was a long walk across the lobby and towards the elevator. Blood trailed him in blotchy prints across the pristine, marbled floor. Along the way, Will stumbled, but he managed to make it inside an awaiting elevator. He banged his bloody hand onto the penthouse floor and the elevator dutifully began to ascend. He leaned against the elevator wall with his mind still in a frazzled daze, and the anxiety he felt the first time in the cab slowly left gooseflesh on his skin. However, he couldn’t leave now, not in this condition, or without the Prince knowing. The elevator doors broke apart and Will continued his painful waltz to the penthouse doors. Seemingly aware of his arrival, the doors parted to reveal the inside of the penthouse.

It was darkened, much to Will's liking as the blinding lights down in the lobby made his eyelids want to curl backwards. He fumbled his way towards the island counter, and he found relief to his aching body by leaning against it. The penthouse was deathly quiet, even more so without Will's mindscape chattering up a storm. However, the silence was broken by the sound of another door somewhere upstairs, followed by footsteps descending the staircase.

Nearby, the Prince was only halfway down the stairs when he took sight of Will, secondly his condition. He finished descending the stairs just as Will huffed and dabbed his fingers at his bleeding brow. The look on Hannibal's face was one of surprise, slightly mixed with horror, but then again, Will couldn't tell. He darted his tongue across his stained lips and painfully straightened himself.

"I'm here for dinner..."

Chapter End Notes

Damn, you can only get beaten up so many times till it becomes a pain in the ass.

Thanks for the support.

Estranged

Chapter Summary

> Will and Hannibal have another chat as the Prince gauges the extent of their relationship.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

XX

"Estranged"

The Prince was, in the least amount of words, surprised upon Will's arrival, but soured at the fledgling's wounded condition. As a gracious host, he tended to Will's condition and guided him to take respite preferably not anywhere near expensive fabric. Will didn't fight him, for the most part, but was zealously cautious to Hannibal's actions. His eyes watched him like sharpened daggers regardless of where Hannibal paced around the elaborate penthouse. His clothes would be another battle, but Hannibal wanted Will to be sated first before propositioning him further.

Hannibal made a mental note to introduce Will to his personal tailor, and in due time, Will wouldn't be dressed like the urchins groveling in Baltimore's underground. He deserved more than that – because he was *more*, and not akin to the less pedigreed. The Prince had to be subtle in his approach as when he encroached, Will rightfully shied away. Him returning to the penthouse meant surely, and agonizingly slowly, Will had begun to lighten the disdain he harbored.

He meant Will no harm, truly, and Hannibal was more concerned about his roughened physique rather than torment. He sat Will down at the dining table, bare except for the glistened faux silverware. The decorations prior had been retired and discarded, not to be seen again on Hannibal's table. The fledgling slumped in his chair with his eyes distant, but a sharp glint remained to his pupils. Hannibal excused himself to the kitchen to quench their thirst, specifically Will's, and a much purer, richer vintage would promote healing. As Hannibal poured glasses in the kitchen, he kept a steady gaze at the fledgling hunched at his table.

Hannibal was disturbed by the frequency he noticed Will's imminent battle scars, or healing bruises, and he wanted nothing more than to fight his monsters away. However, his position put him far beyond neighborhood scuffles and into the throes of a deadlier game of politics. Will was his subject, and it was his Princely duty elsewise to protect him from harm. He had

to exercise his strength as to overreach meant it was work to be cleaned up. Hannibal chose a sweeter vintage; Orient in origin and brought the two glasses back to the dining room. The fledgling was conscious still, but slightly at a daze just as Hannibal gently placed the glass in front of him. He gazed at Hannibal with glossy, mix-matched eyes and a frown tightened on his lips.

Hannibal read the frown as a warning, but nonetheless, he had teeth that he could bare too.

They sat far across from each other, but the animosity was wafting in the air mostly on Will's behalf. Hannibal had not a criticism for Will, or a want to hurt him. He couldn't fathom torturing the fledgling anymore, unless it yielded desirable results, until then, Hannibal was satisfied in drinking in the sight of Will across from him. He'd changed much from the would-be execution. There was something sinister, hauntingly cold behind Will's clouded eyes, and Hannibal wanted to exploit the darkness swirling around in his head. Yet, he couldn't help but be distracted by the darkened bruise upon his cheek, and the slashed brow.

"If I wanted to poison you, William, I would've done it sooner.", Hannibal suggested, seeing how the fledgling was nervous to grasp the neck of the glass.

There was speculation behind those blue-hued eyes, but it dissolved into defeat as the fledgling's thin fingers choked the glass's neck. He brought it to his bloodied lips, and Hannibal watched in anticipation, perhaps with too much anticipation because Will caught his stare. The fledgling sat the glass back down and Hannibal couldn't help but feel a prang of disappointment. He then brought the glass up to his nose, swirling the sanguine nectar within, and took a shallow sip. It wasn't until he swallowed did Will pick up his glass and curtly drink the blood until only an opaque redness was left around the glass. Hannibal smiled.

"You've had an eventful night.", Hannibal crossed his legs under the table. "Fortunately for me it seems, you've decided to join me."

Will huffed and brought the wine glass back up to his lips. When his brow furrowed, his gash begun to seep darkened crimson down his cherubic face. The contrast was striking to the sniveling, frightened-to-death newborn vampire Hannibal had witnessed before. In this moment, he saw Will as raw, unadulterated, and battered like the many times Hannibal had been in his fledgling years. Truth be told that Will would need a thousand more nights to mature to compare with Hannibal, but it was a start that he was reveling in the strength that came with immortality.

"Would you like to talk about it?", Hannibal innocently pressed, seeing how the scar above Will's brow had started to close. He pointed to the healing scar on Will's brow and the fledgling tentatively pressed on it with his fingertips.

The fledgling straightened in his chair with his elbows at the table's edge. He stared down into the emptiness of his wine glass, lifted his eyes, and his frown became a grimace. He lightly tapped his fingers on the table as if he had to drum together his consciousness, or yet his resolve in not coming across the table for Hannibal's neck. The Prince was patient, of course, and he was delighted to have an intimate struggle of wills with the fledgling across

from him. Will broke the stare by adverting his gaze over towards the darkened windowpanes obscured by Baltimore's thickened smog.

"No.", Will responded flatly. "Not at all."

The Prince 'tsked' under his breath. He couldn't be discouraged by the answer when he half-heartedly expected the abrasive response. Neither him or Will was on friendly terms, and that wouldn't change over drinks. However, he wanted to press the fledgling further to reveal his leanings. Hannibal had been slighted by Anarchs in the most recent past and he wasn't going to allow Will to fall victim to their delusions of oppression. No, Hannibal had already noticed the arrogance of Matthew's twisted sense of entitlement bare claws into the fledgling. He folded his hands in his lap and attempted a different approach.

"Well then, William.", Hannibal continued. "Is there anything you want ask of me?"

Will's jaw noticeably tightened as he attempted to keep his focus steeled out to the windows, but no avail, as he brought them back to study Hannibal. In this moment, there was an auspicious sense of futility that either Hannibal could decipher, or could Will maintain. The Prince had not a secret he couldn't fabricate to placate the fledgling. He was a creature without doubts and fears. Will darted his tongue out to moisten his lips as he seethed back in his seat. Hannibal felt the rambunctious tapping of his foot down on the floor.

"Why are you playing these games with me?", the fledgling accused. "Does it make you happy?"

Hannibal was surprised, really, and not in the least offended by the spontaneity of Will's lucidness. Often, he wondered if there was a shred of sanity left in the other man's consciousness, but he was relieved to know there was a part of Will Graham that wasn't entirely shattered into madness. In one moment, Will was far from reach, and in this moment, he was as clear-eyed as Hannibal. The Prince contemplated his response. He found himself at a peculiar odd. He was no happier than Will being miserable. He had only joy in dissecting the parts of Will the Malkavian couldn't despoil himself.

"I'm afraid I'm not playing games with you, William.", the Prince retorted. "It brings me no greater pleasure seeing you in pain, or misery, and I cannot express my sadness seeing you hurt."

Will sucked in his teeth and further sunk into his chair. What fleeting thoughts whisking around that chasm of a head of his, Hannibal couldn't say, but he knew cynicism as clear as day. He had no other true intentions other than straying the fledgling away from the Anarch's perverted viewpoint of justice. Will was beautifully unique, not to be despoiled by the urchins claiming that they were unjustly oppressed. In a way, the Prince felt his chest tightened the longer he beheld Will. Almost sickening to feel his eyes water. He slyly casted his fingertip over his eye to keep the bloodied tear from streaking down his face.

He was starting to feel emotions again. Bedelia was correct in the wickedly profound way she was always right, in the end, and Hannibal was obsessing again. The Prince chided himself as an immortal creature without the need of emotions, but here he was, perfectly enraptured in the enigma and mysteriousness of Will Graham. He didn't know how else to make Will see

he was not his adversary, rather, his sole partner in a world often cruel and unrelentless. He politely cleared his throat. The air had turned heady and it was seemingly harder to keep up the façade.

Will had taken notice of the shift in Hannibal's demeanor and locked onto it with such a precision that it was Hannibal that felt he was being analyzed. He rose slowly, not too fast, to collect the wine glasses between them. Of course, Will kept his stare at the minuscule movements Hannibal performed. He flinched slightly once the Prince reached for the wine glass in front of him. Hannibal turned his back away and as he stalked for the kitchen, Will's stare bore deeper into his back. Something about the fledgling the Prince would always remember, no matter how time ravaged his immortal solitude, Will knew to gauge people's reactions. Yet, Hannibal was not angry or discontent with the fledgling in anyway.

It was his own self he was growing uncomfortable with. He'd like to believe he was poised and well refined, but it was the opposite as the hairs on his neck stood at full attention. He hadn't had this much time with Will without interruption since the fledgling's unconsensual embrace into their lifestyle. Bedelia still was licking her wounds from the previous night and Jack made his presence unknown, at the behest of Hannibal, as his grand stature terrified Will immensely. This night was for them to gauge each other's resolve, see how their walls either faltered and stood ground, and for Hannibal to pry the fledgling's brain a bit more before the inevitable interruption.

Hannibal regained his façade as he turned around to join Will again at the table. The fledgling was unmoved by the change in demeanor although he seemed idly attuned to the frequency of Hannibal's shifting moods. In this sheer moment, Hannibal was to admit his faults in the mistreatment of Will. He had been preoccupied in acquiring Will to be his trinket that he didn't consider that beneath the shroud of mysticism, there was still a man lost and yearning for truth.

Much like Hannibal was when he was embraced.

"I'd like to admit my transgressions, if I may.", Hannibal said humbly. "I have been crass, often terrible to your situation, and for that I'm deeply sorry."

Will's hardened expression softened into what Hannibal could only transcribe as empathy, or some twisted form of it. That cherubic face seemingly found solace in the admittance. The fledgling shifted uncomfortably in his chair and resumed tapping his fingers lightly on the flesh of his upper arms. Hannibal curtly smiled and dipped his head to see where those gold-rimmed eyes entranced on. The fog remained, nevertheless.

"I understand.", the fledgling replied.

Hannibal lit up and his eyes crinkled as he smiled. He was more jubilant hearing Will's acceptance of his apology that he couldn't help but beam. He sat even more straighter with his smile tighter across his face.

"…the things you do, I understand.", the ominous tone taking hold in Will's voice culled the brief happiness Hannibal had found.

The Prince slouched and his smile lessened into a prim frown.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand…”, the Prince offered. “Though my interest has been piqued.”

Will stifled a laugh into the crook of his shoulder. He threw a look over to the Prince that made the Ventrue pause. It was a look of boyish glee almost like an attempt to rile him. Hannibal steeled his façade once more into the regal, nonchalant creature he was used to being.

“You’ve been wearing that flesh suit for so long you’ve forgotten what it feels to take it off.”, the fledgling accused. “Who are you, really?”

“Underneath the wealth and prestige, what’s left of you?”

Hannibal was stunned. He hadn’t had the displeasure of being dissected in such a way, or did he allow for criticism on his behavior. He believed himself to be above the criticism as with his royal title, he earned swathes of unwavering respect. Yet, Will’s unnervingly odd way of unweaving what Hannibal spent many years fabricating shocked him. He couldn’t be entirely at a crossroads as Will was a Malkavian. He could see what was imagined, or the absolute truth hidden in the murkiness of reality. Hannibal took notice of Jack appearing from the far shadows before returning his attention to the fledgling across him. He sucked in his bottom lip momentarily.

“Who am I?”, Hannibal reiterated the looming question. “I am many things, often simultaneously existing, but tell me, William, who do you think I am?”

The atmosphere shifted again into a hovering, suffocating miasma of trepidation. Hannibal exerted his *presence* without constraint. His stare darkened into a maddening, hungry glare that not Will could break away from. The Prince caught Will’s bottom lip quivering and it sickly delighted him into affirming what he had concurred; Will still feared him. Regardless of what his fractured, lying mind could conjure about the state of reality, Will ultimately feared Hannibal as rabbits fleeing from the hunter’s arrival. He’d scream and writhe before Hannibal snapped his neck and render him utterly lifeless. Will sunk into his chair as Jack came into view; his arrival startling the fledgling. The faithful guard stood quietly whilst awaiting for Hannibal to order him, but the Prince would do no such thing. He savored the musk of anxiety lingering in the air.

Will parted his lips to speak and the Prince attentively waited for his response.

“I think you’re a monster.”, Will’s teeth chattered as he spoke. “You’d hunt me down, make me bleed, skin me alive if I’d let you.”

“*Let* me?”, Hannibal couldn’t help but snicker at the thought. “Dear William, would you let me give chase? Or would I have to dredge you from your hiding spot?”

Will darted his tongue again across his lips and Hannibal couldn’t help but hungrily watch. There was something oddly intimate, almost forbidden in the nature of the conversation.

“I don’t know, Prince, I heard rabbits can be quite *vicious*.”, the fear that once dripped vehemently in Will’s tone had waivered into a dangerous, inciteful drawl.

“Indeed, they can be.”, Hannibal said in agreement. “I’d hate to imagine what would happen if I cornered the rabbit.”

“He’d bite.”, Will grinned. “He’d bite and bite until the hand bleeds.”

Dangerous boy.

The Prince hid how impressed he was by shielding his smirk with his finger. He hadn’t had conversation that tantalized his starvation for the deeper, carnal nature of reality. In a perverted way, it was like Will inviting him into the treacherous pits of debauchery and Hannibal would let him drag him face first into it.

Hannibal smirked and relaxed his *presence*. The penthouse was alleviated from the harrowingly sinister area that brewed amongst the table. Hannibal had his fun for the night. Testing the turbulent waters of Will’s resolve had been interesting, but here in this moment, Hannibal had been stirred into thoughts of violence. Will, on the other hand, seemed to be at his precipice as he faltered on the lines of respect, or continuing his utter disdain for Hannibal. The latter seemed to be the truth as no longer could he stop his facial expressions from conveying his true feelings. Hannibal was settled with it. He kicked his leg up over his knee and rested back in the chair. He would save another test for their next conversation, preferably with Will at his mercy, or strangled under his hold.

“You’ve sated my appetite for good conversation.”, the Prince complimented. “Though I’m afraid dinner was terribly short.”

Will shrugged his shoulders. The wounds of his face healed considerably well in the short time they conversed, much to the Prince’s delight, but blood still blotched on his skin. He rose up slowly just as Jack grimaced and instinctively hovered his gigantic hand on his sword. The Prince chided him with a wagging finger and the guard relaxed.

“Am I excused?”, Will asked. “Or is there another course?”

Hannibal kept himself from saying something utterly depraved and shook his head instead. The fledgling was a cheekily fervent strumpet without a leash for his active tongue. Although Hannibal had enjoyed their time, he would scold the fledgling later for his sarcasm.

Will slouched and turned on his heels. Granted that Hannibal would’ve liked to keep him here longer, perhaps for a bath and a change of clothes, Will was not obligated to stay any longer. He watched the fledgling leave and couldn’t help but feel his lips tingle. He hadn’t been this way in a lifetime. The Prince wanted to push Will further to drag that darkness further, but until the next night, he could savor what’d he witnessed.

The catalyst.

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal is a jerk.

Sabbatical

Chapter Summary

The Anarchs receive unexpected visitors. Matthew's actions jeopardizes their safety.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for descriptions of violence and explicit language. Please continue with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XXI

“Sabbatical”

The Last Call was live again with the familiar, drunkenly happy patrons gyrating their bodies down on the dancefloor. Liquor poured as freely as water as the music thumped loudly above the Anarchs surveying the club scene. Humans and vampires alike made merry and strengthened their wicked relationships with sex and drunkenness made the air heavy. With alcohol came cash flow, and with cashflow, more Anarch ventures could take place. The Anarchs looked on as hushed transactions happened behind shaded corners, and in between passes.

Matthew was abnormally sober, Freddie more so, and Brian kept himself straight edged. The three of them had to be; with the constant threat of vampire firebombs sprinting in the door, there was no more happy, drunken rendezvouses they once enjoyed.

Matthew was in such a state of straining tenseness, Brian was sure he felt the Anarch leader quake. He didn’t comment on it as Matthew was already quick to anger, even quicker to fight, and Freddie was the buffer between them in case a punch or kick was to fly. The Brujah did notice the faint smell of gunpowder wafting from his compatriot which left the open-ended question of what Matthew was up to in the early hours of the night.

As if Matthew could feel the suspicion between them, he looked over to the Brujah with a strained expression. Freddie was slightly oblivious to what her counterparts conjured between them as her focus was on screening the dancefloor.

Matthew caved in to the Brujah's unrelenting glare and backed away from the upper loft's railing. He ushered for Brian to join him in the backroom and the Brujah followed suit. The Brujah noticed the Anarch's firearm tucked haphazardly underneath his shirt and made note. Freddie threw a look over her shoulder, but she didn't follow either of the Anarchs towards the back. Matthew gestured for Brian to shut the door behind him. It made little difference as the music vibrating downstairs drowned out the shrillest of screams, let alone the quietest of whispers.

Brian lit his remaining cigarette and inhaled till the smoke curled into a grey tendril. He exhaled once Matthew was at their makeshift war table. The Anarch leader leaned over the beer-stained, worn table and sighed. The Brujah knew of that look; it was the same look Matthew's predecessor often wore on his face. A tired, weary look on a man encumbered by decades of strife. The Brujah had his fair share of losses and misfortunes, but never had he seen Matthew in such a depressive state.

"Alright.", Brian initiated the conversation, firstly because he hated playing guessing games, and secondly, he didn't need to hear another pity party from the often morose Anarch leader. "Bite me."

"You fired your gun tonight, so, who did you shoot?"

Matthew shielded a laugh. His eyes creased when he laughed. He hadn't thought it was obvious that he'd played lone ranger tonight, but Brian had a wicked sense of knowing when Matthew was hiding something.

"They aren't alive, if that's what you're asking me.", Matthew chided. "Besides, it was self-defense."

"No seriously, Matt.", the Brujah wasn't going to give up. "Give it to me straight."

Matthew couldn't lie or weed his way out of deceiving his longtime friend. After all, it was Matthew who was solely responsible in protecting the elusive Will Graham. Brian needed to know about the incident, much so as the perpetrators. The Anarch inhaled, exhaled, and braced himself for the aftermath.

"Well, I saved your fledgling's ass out there.", Matthew said, lifting his eyes from the table. "But man, I don't know if I'm impressed or scared for him."

Matthew had only known a handful of fledglings in his lifetime, including himself, but never a case like Will Graham. A sireless, outcasted Malkavian fledgling with a death sentence over his head was the unlikeliest of vampires to exist, nevertheless, Matthew had a slight obligation in ensuring his survival. The Malkavians of Baltimore hadn't swooped him into their cuckoo nest, the Camarilla would rather kill him and be done with it, and Brian couldn't be in every place and every time. Matthew still held onto the hope that Will Graham could be molded for Anarchism, or act accordingly to their ideals. He definitely needed some combat training, firearms mastery, and a disdain for authority though.

The Brujah nearly choked on his cigarette and he flicked out from between his lips. He was beyond alarmed. He was on the precipice of engulfing into flames. Matthew caught the shift

in the air and instinctively bristled.

“Wait, wait, rewind.”, the Brujah argued. “Will was out *where*?”

Matthew’s brows crinkled together. He seemed passively annoyed at the request of repeating himself, but nevertheless, he obligated his Anarch compatriot.

“Wandered into Sabbat territory. Nothing too deep, but I had to dust two of them.”, Matthew was rather nonchalant at his retelling, but Brian could’ve shattered into a million pieces.

“Before you run out of he—“, the Anarch continued just as Brian nearly turned into a fiery inferno of swears.

“Are you *fucking* kidding me? You didn’t bring him back the *fuck* here?”, the Brujah spat with his tongue lashing. “You just let him *fucking* go back out there!?”

Matthew seethed and crossed his arms. Naturally, Brian had the right to be utterly pissed off, but to directly challenge the Anarch leader’s reputation in this scenario was of the greatest offense. The Anarch leader did not need to air the ignorance the Brujah had committed as Brian caught his wild tongue from lashing further. He continued to seethe just as Freddie entered the room, seemingly ignorant to the disturbance she walked into, and she joined Matthew’s side at the table.

“I’m sorry…”, Brian huffed. He ran a hand back through his slickened locks and feinted the bubbling anger oozing off him. “…Didn’t mean to blow up, it’s just that kid means everything to me.”

Matthew forgave him, as he naturally did numerous times, and he himself relaxed his toughened demeanor. He couldn’t be too critical of Brian’s response as many times he was younger, Nines kept the same energy for him. It was a symbiotic relationship that Matthew shared with Nines, no matter their distance, or how their views conflicted. Regardless of Will’s pedigree, Brian was undoubtedly tied into his upbringing and hell had no fury that came close to the bond between a sire and their childer. As far as Matthew knew, Will was tuckered away in Camarilla territory, and not a Sabbat or Anarch dared to venture into their turf. That was the least pressing of matters as Matthew had already disclosed that the Sabbat were closer, uncomfortably closer, and brazen enough to attack a sole fledgling.

“He’s safe for now, but we got a shitload of other problems on our hands.”, Matthew continued. “*Sabbat* kind of problems.”

Freddie grimaced just as Brian sucked in his teeth. Neither could say they had a comfortable relationship with the Sabbat within Baltimore. They were a budding sect of would-be vampires with a twisted, often sadistic approach for politics. Their allegiance was skewered for the most part, and not specific to a certain pedigree of vampire within their ranks although not many Ventrues or Toreadors joined their arms. With the diversity of their members, there wasn’t a clear understand on who wasn’t a Sabbat fanatic, or affiliated with them in some form.

Matthew had his run-ins with them over the course of his activism, but never had he had personal encounters with the overly zealous sect of hooligans. They were enemies to the Anarchs and Camarilla alike; ironic as neither of the two political afflictions made merry unless it was through a mutual enemy. As far as the historical context to their bad blood, the Sabbat was ruthless, unthinking in their cruelty unlike the calculated sadism the Camarilla perpetrated under the guise of authoritarianism.

The Anarchs were never fond of the Sabbat and their lack of remorse. Anarchs fully loathed the Camarilla and their practices, but never did they pervert the movement into a means of open-minded violence. Despite the overwhelmingly hatred for the wayward, violent vampires, the Sabbat flourished in the murky undergrounds and ostracized hidey-holes scattered around the world. Their clear and utter disrespect for their history and culture was evident in their various, scattered, and tattered proclamation of the falseness of their forefathers. Their most heinous of crimes was the liberal act of performing *diablerie* or what Matthew considered a form of vampiric cannibalism. Self-proclaimed "truest" of Caine's offspring, the Sabbat thought of murder and *diablerie* as common as the night turning into day.

Diablerie, in the worst terms, was the ultimate assault a vampire could enact on another. To ingest not only the blood, but soul of vampire meant taking in their memories, their powers, and lastly the entirety of their existence. The Anarch leader felt disgust rivet up from his stomach at the sheer though of tasting another vampire's blood. It was beyond wicked, something Matthew would rather not keep his mind on.

With Sabbat encroaching further into Baltimore, Matthew felt goosebumps prickle his arms at the thought of such a violent, monstrous sect of vampires stalking their shadows. If there was anything, truly anything, he feared more than the final death, it was the Sabbat ripping his flesh off his bones and eating him alive. He shuddered and Freddie picked up on it. She attentively came closer to wrap her arm around his waist to pull him close. It was a momentarily comforting gesture that lessened the goose flesh sprouting on Matthew's flesh, but it was short lived as the female Anarch stepped back into her space. The Anarch cleared his throat as Brian watched with a mounting suspicion there was more between them other than compatriotism.

It would have to be discussed later though Matthew held Freddie in the same regard as he would as a sister, and vice-versa.

"We have Sabbat pressing further into Anarch territory.", Matthew began. "They've made their roots towards the east, trickling into the south, and it'll just be a matter of nights till they are bold enough to come for us on the west."

Brian scoffed. Matthew expected some skepticism as for a very long time, the Sabbat was content in stalking their small, designated hidey-holes in Baltimore's underground. Their existence was obscured by mysticism and rumors, but never did Brian, or any other vampire expect the Sabbat to crawl from their dark shadows into the mortal night that was their world of darkness. Will's encounter was going to be the first of many if the Sabbat threat wasn't curbed with a sharpened stake.

“You’re kidding.”, the Brujah replied. “One or two Sabbat fucks haven’t been a problem in the past.”

“He’s right, Matt.”, Freddie chimed in. “The two that attacked you and Will had to be strays. Sabbat aren’t known for their intelligence.”

Matthew audibly groaned which earned him respective stares from his compatriots. He’d been in Baltimore long enough to know when there was something amiss in the air. He felt it on the tips of his fingers, at the ends of his neck hair, and most importantly, he could taste the blood that would spill on his tongue. Nines instilled that sense into him that he always needed to expect the worst of possibilities, regardless if imagined, or inevitably destined to occur. With the Sabbat, Matthew prepared for the absolute worst of outcomes. He couldn’t say it in any other way to make Brian and Freddie understand that it wasn’t paranoia, rather, it was bound to happen when they didn’t expect it.

Like the vampire firebomb Hannibal had sent to their front door like a welcome basket, Matthew needed to disclose every and all possibilities of another attack on their home turf. The last attack left them open to the vultures, but a second, deadlier assault would kill them. Matthew didn’t want to imagine any Anarch within his *elysium* dead, or worse because of his due negligence.

“Look, I wouldn’t be telling either you this if this wasn’t serious.”, Matthew argued vehemently. “I can’t shake this feeling they’re up to fucking something.”

Freddie raised her hands up and turned away. Brian conveyed his discernment in the form of eyeing Matthew with a shrouded look of disbelief. The Anarch leader could only warn his friends in oh so many ways before he would be like a broken cuckoo. He knew at a moment’s notice; the Sabbat was going to tear them apart and save their best parts for the crows. He couldn’t believe Brian’s skepticism either as Matthew had to save the fledgling, he cared deeply of as a matter of fact, from becoming the Sabbat’s first of many victims.

“For once, can the two of you not be so fucking dismissive when I’m telling you something like this is going to happen?”, gritted the Anarch leader. “If I hadn’t seen it with my two eyes I wouldn’t be barking.”

Freddie turned back around and shot a gaze over to Brian, who seemingly returned the stare, and the both of them caved into Matthew’s passionate outcry. The Anarch leader was relieved as for the most part, he wasn’t wasting his time preaching to a deaf crowd. On top of the *Elizabethan Dane* making his skin crawl, the disappearance of Dr. Faust, and now Sabbat lurking in their midst, Baltimore was covered in an awe-inducing miasma Matthew would rather not choke in.

“So what do we do?”, Freddie asked. “Go out stumbling in the dark for the boogeyman?”

“No, that’s the last thing we need to do.”, Matthew responded. “We need to keep our movements secretive.”

“What about Faust and the *Dane*?”, Brian interjected. “That’s hardly something we can do in secrecy.”

The Brujah had a point. Dr. Faust's untimely disappearance arose suspicions across Baltimore, including the remaining Malkavians within city bounds, and no doubt the Sabbat heard of the primogen's absence. Opening up the case for investigation meant talking to people, unfamiliar strangers with no allegiances except their own, and Matthew would be damned if he was going to be caught up in a trap.

If Matthew were to point fingers, it would surely end up on the Sabbat's behalf. It was more than likely that Dr. Faust had met tribulations with the forlorn zealots, but Matthew had not a shred of evidence to prove his suspicions. He feverishly hoped that Dr. Faust was out on an extended vacation, but the chances of such a happier ending was slim as the Sabbat, if they were responsible for his absence, would waste no time disposing him.

The Camarilla was not to know of the Anarch's knowledge of the mad doctor. On the other hand, the sarcophagus wouldn't be touched whilst Hannibal employed the tightest of security to watch over his desired treasure. Hannibal couldn't hold all three fronts; Anarchs, Sabbat, and the sarcophagus. That, Matthew was sure of. In the meantime, Matthew would move in silence not to attract any more stray Sabbat itching to scrap. He murdered two of them already and there would be not a shadow Matthew didn't expect him not to be watched from. As for Freddie, he wanted her to continue the logistics of securing the sarcophagus through her learned contacts, and Brian to keep a close eye to Will.

After all, without Will, they had no insider in the court of the Prince. The more Hannibal was preoccupied with the fledgling, the more time Matthew had in stealing that accursed sarcophagus from right under his pompous nose. Brian would naturally disagree as the Brujah wanted Will far from the Prince's clutches. He could be persuaded elsewise.

In turbulent times like these, Matthew couldn't swallow his pride and contact Nines. He vowed many years ago when he emigrated to Baltimore, he wouldn't rely on Nines to solve his problems. Yet, he was desperately in need for his mentor's advice in settling the threat brewing at their door. NinesFlustered, Matthew backed away from the table to sour at the window.

"We'll have to move under the radar.", the Anarch commented as he looked down to the street. "Preferably in opposite directions."

"You don't think it'd be better to move as a pack.", Freddie asked waywardly. "I mean, they'll expect us to be alone. Why not give them the benefit of the doubt."

Matthew shook his head. It was exactly what the Sabbat expected of the Anarchs. If they were to grow paranoid, or cautious of the Sabbat's movements, then naturally it would be easier to pick them off in masses rather than through espionage and quiet assassinations. Unlike the Sabbat that attacked Will, they wouldn't choose unexpecting victims, rather, they would strike hard and fast with their numbers.

Matthew could hold his own in a fight, but he would be distracted should Freddie, Brian, or any other Anarch was caught in the fray between themselves and a Sabbat encounter. Their tightly knit comradery would be their ultimate demise as the Sabbat owed no loyalty to anyone except their individual selves.

He watched passersby shuffle and bump against each other in an endless rat race to the eventual end. He spotted vampires amongst the currents, some obvious, while others passing like the faux humans the Masquerade taught them to be. Outside of this very window, their world was a cesspool of hate and murder. Matthew had steeled his stomach many years prior for the eventual casualties of war, but he couldn't shake the realization that he was apart of that hateful, never-ending cycle of death and destruction. The Sabbat, in the kindest words, was instruments of a world designed to punish the weak and glorify the bloodthirsty. In some odd, uniquely horrifying way, the Sabbat was a commentary that without the vague, misconstrued morality vampires placed upon themselves, they were no better than beasts disguised in people suits. Matthew grimaced as his running thoughts rummaged around his skull at the rhythm of the music downstairs.

Brian leaned on the wall nearby and crossed his arms. Matthew gave him a quick glance. The Brujah shrugged his shoulders and lightly tapped his fingers against the curvature of his arms.

"I believe you.", admitted Brian. "and I can't thank you enough for looking out for Will."

"You'd do the same for me.", Matthew suggested. "Besides, you need to teach that kid how to throw a punch or two."

Brian cackled and threw his hands up.

"Yeah, the *little killer* already asked me already."

"Better get to it, old man.", Matthew darted his eyes to the door. "He should be home now."

"Yeah, yeah. I know when I'm not wanted.", the older vampire confessed as he left the wall.

Freddie nodded in agreement and both were to leave Matthew alone, until the music downstairs had abruptly stalled, and a series of loud crashes and screams came from downstairs. Matthew wretched his head around and his hand went straight for the handgun tucked under his shirt. The three Anarchs went back to the loft to look at the commotion happening downstairs.

Below them, three figures stalked between the parted club patrons with a twisted sense of proudness in their waltz. Matthew could make out their distinctive tattoos on their grey flesh and he held a snarl in his throat. Brian grimaced just as he caught Freddie by her arm; the fire-starter of an Anarch was about to vault over the railing and down onto the dance floor.

They were most definitely Sabbat; their tattoos and unearthly physiques made them tick out like sore thumbs. The presumed leader of the rag-tag pack was a Gangrel; his muscular frame was covered in thin sheets of burly hair, and there was a slight bow in his jaw indicating longer fangs. The other two were either Malkavians or Brujahs themselves. The trio spotted the Anarchs up on the railing and it was the Gangrel of the pack that beamed a toothy taunt over Matthew's way.

The Anarch leader crinkled his nose and it took a considerable amount of willpower not to jump down from the loft himself and pummel the Gangrel into ash. However, it was in due

respect that he was to welcome a vampire into his *elysium* under the guise of no ill-will. He looked at Brian, then to Freddie, and reluctantly went downstairs. The club patron's murmured in a hushed frenzy as they watched Matthew approach the Sabbat fanatics.

"I'm Matthew and this is my club.", the Anarch announced. "You're free to order drinks, but I'd otherwise suggest you get of here."

The Sabbat pack laughed like hysterical crones and Matthew seethed. He didn't like to be taunted, or made a fool of, but the vampires in front of him knew exactly what they were doing by causing a scene in *The Last Call*. Matthew turned his head slightly and gestured for Freddie and Brian to join him and without doubt, both Anarchs joined their faithful leader downstairs. Freddie eyed the Malkavian female closest to her and in turn, the Malk eyed her with a devilish hunger that made Matthew's own skin crawl. Brian kept himself composed although the Brujah he was having a stare-down with was practically begging for the older vampire to make the first move.

"You know why we're here.", the Gangrel rasped, pointing at Matthew. The Anarch leader slowly reached his hand back for his firearm just as the Gangrel narrowed his stare.

"Nah, I don't think I do.", the Anarch leader disagreed. "Tell me, why are *you* here?"

The Gangrel's pointed nose had twitched like what a dog's nose would do upon Matthew's open-ended taunt. Naturally, the Gangrel rose to stand more upright like his not-so-human counterparts. He stood a monstrous foot over Matthew, but the Anarch leader had seen uglier contenders in his hay day. He welcomed the challenge. He was practically itching to scrap.

"Think of this as a warning, *Anarch*.", the Gangrel growled, but more so announced to the entirety of the club. "Your days are numbered, and *Gehenna* will rise."

"Warning?", Matthew had a firm grasp on the outline of the gun strapped to his back. "Do you know where the *fuck* you are, you religious freak of nature?"

Brian shot a wary gaze to Matthew just as Freddie did as both braced themselves for a fight of their life. Freddie more so because of the spontaneity of the Malkavian in front of her; wobbling back and forth in a hypnotizing waltz of insanity. The Brujah could hold his own, especially against his own kind, but if there were to start a fight in this very club, no doubt the Sabbat and Camarilla will know of the bloodshed.

"You know what? Get the *fuck* out my club.", Matthew barked, pulling the handgun from behind him and brazenly pointed it at the Gangrel. "Fuck you, you maniacal, shit stain of a fucking vampire."

"Take your fucking newborns with you."

The Gangrel's comrades took steps back upon the arrival of Matthew's firearm, and it was then that the Anarch realized they were newborns. They hadn't smelled as rotted as the Gangrel, or did they seem to be entirely sure of what they were doing. Once Freddie and Brian picked up upon the nativity of the adversaries in front of them, they seemingly goaded

the would-be newborns to back up the bark they brought. The Brujah and Malkavian cowered by the Gangrel, who, bristled at the end of Matthew's gun.

"If you shoot me…", the Gangrel attempted to defend himself. "all of the Sabbat will be upon you."

"Better yet, Anarch….", the Gangrel threw a look at his cowering posse and growled. "You'll be breaking your Masquerade, eh?"

The Anarch was livid as his finger twitched anxiously upon the curve of the trigger. He felt hotter than a thousand suns and the blood in his veins was like liquid fire. In this moment, he cared about nothing; not morals, civility, or the Masquerade. Time and time again when he contended with one enemy, another sprouted, then another, till eventually all his friends were dead. He didn't want a repeat of Los Angeles. He didn't want his friends to die or his movement to falter.

"It's not worth it, Matt.", Brian warned. "We have bigger fish to fry."

Freddie nodded and pulled back.

"Come on, Matt.", agreed Freddie. "Don't let these bastards rile you up."

It wasn't until he felt Brian's hand on his wrist did he gently lax and lower the gun. He looked to the older Brujah and sighed. The Sabbat in front of him wasn't worth it, or could he justify the blood he was about to spill. Much to their relief, the Malkavian and Brujah fledglings inched themselves back towards the door of the club. Their Gangrel leader, however, didn't seem to know when to humbly accept a truce and seemed inhumanely amused at Matthew's restraint.

"That's right, Anarch.", the Gangrel spat. "Tuck your tail between your legs."

Matthew ignored the gloating as he wasn't going to stoop any further with the Gangrel. Brian uttered something to him, but he didn't hear that either. He snapped at the DJ to resume the music, but the next phrase the Gangrel insulted Matthew with threw him over.

"Run away just like Nines did…"

The Anarch leader lost the fragile grip he kept on his rage, and the air shifted into a heated musk that not only did Freddie and Brian witness, but everyone else within the vicinity. Zeller pawed for Matthew to give him the gun but the Anarch leader's grip was impeccably tight. To speak ill of Nines, *the* Nines Rodriguez, was a grievance that Matthew couldn't forgive or should he ever needed to hear. Damned be the Masquerade and the tight morals it encompassed. In this moment, it was the sound of blood rushing to his ears that dulled out his friends' pleas.

"Matthew—!", the Brujah attempted to stop his friend from doing unthinkable, but a moment too late.

Matthew didn't register turning around, raising his arm, and curling his finger tightly on the trigger. He didn't feel the bullets escaping from the barrel in a quick succession. Gunpowder wafted up his nostrils and stung his olfactory nerves, and there was a cramp shooting up his forearm. Blood sprayed hot against his face and tasted equally foul upon his lips. Screams erupted in the club as people, vampire and human alike, scrambled from the dance floor and out the front door. The Malkavian and Brujah that joined the Gangrel fled as well as their companion was riddled with bullet holes. He didn't stop shooting until the gun was completely unloaded and only blank clicks came from pulling the trigger.

The Anarch leader swallowed thickly as the red obscuring his vision lifted and he was staring down a corpse riddled with holes, blood, and gore on the beer-coated floor. The familiar orange light of the final death flashed above them all as the club was soon empty, except for Matthew, Brian, and Freddie. Cold sweat had beaded against his forehead and his arm shook with such trepidation that the gun fell out of his palms. Freddie caught it just as Matthew stumbled back. He hadn't felt such a rush since becoming a vampire, but it was short-lived as reality came crashing in.

"What the hell did you just do…?", Brian asked wide-eyed, seemingly not registering the series of events happening before him. "Matthew….What the fuck…"

Matthew rubbed his face into the crook of his arm and felt his fangs roll out from his gums. The smell of iron and death wafted in the club's air. He suddenly felt out of sorts as his legs threatened to fail underneath him. He stumbled back by the grace of Brian keeping him upright as he watched the corpse in front of them disintegrate into a pile of heated ash. He looked at Brian, then to Freddie, then back to the crackling ashes.

"Started a war…"

Chapter End Notes

Oopsy.

Girl Lost

Chapter Summary

Will gets a visit from an unexpected familiar and saves a life.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for descriptions of violence and gore. Please continue with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XXII

"Girl Lost"

Will kept his hands crumbled in his soiled pants pockets as he couldn't help but itch as he was leaving Hannibal's tower. In essence, it was his fault for attempting to decipher Hannibal, and allow him to string him out this way. The Prince was more than hauntingly unnerving to be around.

He wanted a much-needed shower. His injures healed considerably well, thanks to what Hannibal gave him to drink, but that didn't salve his ruined clothes. He remembered how the vintage tasted on his tongue; overly sweet but finished with a tart note. He hadn't thought blood would taste so well. He didn't have a refined palate or experience in drinking from anything other than a blood bag, but the taste lingered long on his tastebuds. Though he'd never thank Hannibal for the drink; he didn't want to thank that man for anything.

The encounter with the Prince was different from before and their initial meeting just nights before. Hannibal, in a weirdly intimate sense, talked to Will as if he was an equal, and not a subject. Although the Prince kept his prestige over Will, it stunned the fledgling more noticing how humble he had appeared when apologizing for his past transgressions. Will didn't believe it, naturally, as a creature as sadistic as Hannibal was unable to feel sorrow, let alone empathy. He was partially right about Hannibal; the flesh suit had become too comfortable for him to continuing wearing.

The night was cooler, almost cold and Will could taste rain at the tip of his tongue. He was focused on getting home as with his past explorations, he either ended up getting pummeled into the dirt, or running into anxious ghouls. He did think about Knox Harrington for a moment. The ghoul was awfully terrible at lying, but Will felt a bit bad for him. Alana had

suggested Tung was no longer in Baltimore and doubt lingered around that revelation. As far as Will knew, vampires didn't leave their ghouls behind on a whim. Yet, Knox had not a clue where his nasty master was, and perhaps Knox was abandoned after all.

He and Knox shared a commonality; both abandoned by their would-be providers.

Will crossed the street briskly as the cars creeping down the boulevard slowed their sluggish pace to grant him passage. Upon making distance between himself and Hannibal's tower, he had grown familiar to the upscale, posh area of downtown. Department stores, high-end lounges, and the occasional statue garden were testaments to the wealth that Will found unobtainable. Even with immortality, the wealth behind the pristine glass seemed to be a lifetime away. It wouldn't make him happier, or any less of a vampire should he wanted to indulge in the wealth, and he settled on the realization it was not for him.

Will stopped to watch what was happening in the store front. The people within the stores hovered over their meticulously curated wares with a feverish greed. They chatted and made merry while simultaneously aloof to the harshness of life that was in Baltimore. Their demeanor told Will enough; these people could never be related to. He grimaced and turned away from the store front. He caught a glance of the familiar yellow taxicab that haunted him from every street of Baltimore. He couldn't complain, really, as the taxicab seemingly knew that Will always wanted a way of home.

He approached the taxicab and pulled the door back. He sat and fumbled with the seatbelt as the nightly news broadcasted from the radio up front. The driver beamed cheekily and lowered his glasses at Will from the rear-view mirror. Will mentally groaned whenever the taxi driver looked at him. It was as if he knew something about Will that he didn't know, or worse, there was something Will couldn't see.

"Where to, child of Malkav?", the taxi driver uttered hollowly. "Or do you want me to just drive?"

"Home.", Will responded, clasping the seatbelt together. "Take me home."

The taxi driver did what he was requested and dutifully started up the taxi and pulled off from the street. The traffic was light, much lighter than what Will was used to, and the ride was smoother. He threw his head back against the seat and sighed. His brow slightly throbbed and his back felt like it'd been compressed underneath a block of concrete. He allowed his eyes to flutter down till they were closed entirely. The radio ahead of him drowned out much of what his whispering mind echoed as respite came rather quickly to him.

His sleep was without dreams plaguing him, but he was startled abruptly when he heard the taxi door open then slam again. He shot a gaze over to his right to find he was not alone in the taxi, rather, he was joined by something only his fractured reality fantasized. A beheaded man with blood sprouting from his neck, and presumably his head in his lap, was the newest passenger in the infernal hell ride that was the taxicab. Will shuddered as he felt his scream electrifying in his throat. But what came out was a strangled rasp and the head sitting in the man's lap turned to him. Upon closer examination, Will recognized the head, and the body it accompanied.

His sire.

Will rubbed his eyes harshly until specks of white glittered by. His eyes burned at the trauma, but his sire didn't dissipate from his view. His sire smiled, almost sadly, as both of his hands lifted his disemboweled head and sat it gently back onto the empty neck. There was a sick *crunch* just as Will watched in horror as the head became reattached to the body. The taxi driver up front was seemingly oblivious to the nightmare that was happening in his back seat which further solidified the fact Will was hallucinating.

"You're a figment of my imagination.", Will said. "A cruel joke."

His sire shrugged his shoulders and dug into his pants pocket. From there, he retrieved a pack of cigarettes, the same kind Brian tended to smoke, and snapped his fingers. His fingertips ignited the cigarette and ash curled until it was a tendril of darkened ash. The aroma wafted in the tight space of the taxicab and Will crinkled his nose. His sire exhaled which made smoke escape his nostrils and from the haphazardly strewn sutures around his neck. He looked at Will and grinned.

"I'm afraid not, *amigo*.", his sire counteracted. "I'm as real as the meaning of life and the head on your neck."

Will instinctively covered his neck with his hands. Seeing how his sire had been previously beheaded made his own throat dry. The taxi turned the radio up to an inconsiderate volume and Will was bombarded with the obnoxious retelling of the nightly news. He cringed and attempted to shake his head loose of the audio, but it was an ill-willed attempt as his head was starting to chatter up a storm. The cacophony of chattering voices silenced into white noise at the snap of his sire's fingers. Will huffed as his sire finished his cigarette.

"Y'know…", his sire resumed. "I never wanted this for you, or for us."

Will raised an eyebrow as his sire's voice was the clearest, he'd ever heard. It was comforting almost, although terrifyingly reminiscent to a hallucination. He continued to listen morosely as the traffic began to pile ahead of them. Sinisterly cruel for the universe to trap Will in such a predicament.

"You were my only childe, you know?", his sire flicked the cigarette towards the front seat. Will watched it fly and land haphazardly onto the dashboard. Again, the taxi driver didn't react as he seemed preoccupied on maneuvering through the slowing traffic.

"He would've killed us both."

The fledgling scoffed. Hannibal hadn't killed him yet for reasons unknown, but eventually the night would come. Whether it was a week, or a month, or even a year from now, Hannibal seemed tantalized on killing Will himself but not without torturing him mentally. Will crossed his arms and rested his head against the window.

"Spare the rod, kill the child.", Will answered disgruntled. "He should've killed me that night too."

“Don’t say that, childe.”, his sire chastised, the velvety-smooth of drawl his accent had became a sharpened knife. “There’s more to this existence other than waiting for the true death.”

Of course as Will’s entire purpose was a never-ending fever dream. He himself didn’t know why he was kept alive other than to be entertainment to Hannibal, or a punching bag for every other vampire in Baltimore. Those he came in contact with including Brian seemed to have everything planned out for Will, but never did anyone ask what he wanted. Will tightened his brows the more he felt his sire’s eyes bore into the side of his face. He was a walking, living corpse and his sire was a pile of ash, though he was very much a tangible form as of late. A moment of brevity placed between them before Will could muster a glance to his sire.

“If you’re going to torment me, speak your evil to me.”, he suggested. “After all, it’s what your supposed to do.”

His sire purred and cracked his neck and shoulders. Will bristled at the sound and felt all the hair on his body stand at attention. The traffic ahead was at a complete standstill as sirens could be heard approaching from behind. Will thought to jump out the cab and walk, but there wasn’t a guarantee his fully constructed figment of a sire wouldn’t follow him out into the wilderness that was Baltimore. He sighed and counted seconds.

“Ask away, Will.”, his sire said, igniting another cigarette from his fingertips. “If you’d like to hear my evil.”

“Why did you do this to me?”, Will asked. “You had sex with me, then killed me, and made me a *fucking* vampire.”

“Ah, I thought you wanted to die.”, his sire rebutted. “After all, you seemed eager to hop into my car.”

Will sucked in his teeth. Back then, he wanted a fix and a decent bed to sleep in. If he truly wanted to kill himself, he would’ve done it ages ago. For his sire to bring it up now, Will could bash his own skull into the window. He rolled his eyes and averted his gaze into the car beside them.

“I didn’t consent to being a fucking corpse. Have I misrepresented you somewhere along those lines?”

“Of course not, Will.”, his sire jested. “But then again, I couldn’t help myself.”

“You’re sick.”, the fledgling hissed. “You’re like a plague.”

“And let the pus run from my boils and rats eat my flesh.”

“You made me this way.”, Will couldn’t harbor enough hate at his sire for cursing him with bouts of madness, and no real sense of what was reality, and what was fictionalized ramblings of a madman. “My head talks a dozen different tongues.”

“Thank our father, Malkav, for madness is the truest blessing.”

“*Fuck* you.”, Will would’ve liked to be anything but some disastrous result of a bloodline gone loony.

“Ah, don’t be that way, Will.”, his sire chided. “I didn’t embrace you just because I could.”

“Well look what happened….you lost your head and now I’m indebted to the Prince of *fucking* Baltimore.”

“True but, I saw a destiny in you.”, his sire continued. “Something so insane I couldn’t help but make you one of us.”

“I’d behead you myself if I could.”, Will watched as an ambulance squeezed through the parade of cars on either side of the street. “You’re maggot food to me.”

“That’s sweet of you, Will.”, his sire kicked his feet up onto the back of the driver’s seat. “Preach that to the choir, childe. You were already crazy before I embraced you.”

Will scoffed. He was no saner than his sire insane. He perfectly had his mental health under wraps, for the most part, but he was not in the mood to be psychoanalyzed.

“You’re not a shrink – don’t play these head games with me.”, the taxicab moved at a snail’s pace as the taxi driver grew overwhelmingly irate with the state of traffic. He slammed his hand hard against the car’s horn although futile as there happened to be a car accident only cars ahead of them.

“Ask another question.”

“Can I trust my friends?”, Will was beyond annoyed and contemplated walking the rest of the way home. As insufferable as this conversation had turned out to be, he wasn’t obligated to listen to a dead man talk.

“What friends? We are without friends.”, his sire soured at the question.

“Brian is my friend.”, Will suggested. “He’s been by my side since you’ve abandoned me.”

“I didn’t abandon you, remember?”, his sire corrected him harshly. “He’s a liar, ask again.”

Will gritted his teeth.

“Alana?”

“She lies, more than me I suppose.”, his sire cracked his knuckles in his lap. “Malkavians aren’t trustworthy.”

Will felt his eye twitch.

“Then who can I trust if not who I consider my friends?”

“Not a soul – remember that, Will.”, his sire looked at him as a parent does to scold their unruly offspring. “This is a place of death.”

“Then you agree, Hannibal will kill me?”, the fledgling asked. Of course Hannibal would eventually kill him, but he needed the affirmation for his sire, who undoubtedly had his own life taken by Hannibal.

“No, that evil locked away in that box will.”

Will swallowed. He hadn’t thought about the sarcophagus in the midst of getting his ass kicked, or being held prisoner to the Prince, but if Brian’s reaction was any indicator to how on edge he was, then Will was right to be nervous. He remembered the dream he had the first night he stayed at Hannibal’s penthouse; the bloodied man inferencing that their nights were numbered. He shook his head and tried to focus back on his sire.

“What’s in the box?”, Will asked with a slight quiver in his tone. “What kind of surprise is inside?”

“Be careful what you ask for, Will.”, his sire dismissed. “I’d run if I was you.”

Run?

Will hadn’t thought about running from Baltimore since he came here. He had good reasons not to leave, especially now with the Prince breathing down his neck, and he had no other place to call home.

“Where should I go then?”, Will asked. He looked over to where he noticed his sire was beginning to bubble into a mass of ash. He couldn’t watch the horror of his body morphing back into the heated, bloodied ash from nights ago. “Please, tell me where I should go?”

“Far, far away.”, his sire said in a hushed, raspy tone. “Go where *he* can’t find you.”

The only remnants of his sire was a single cigarette bud left in the seat. Will rubbed his eyes again to find that the cigarette butt remained, but no other indication his sire had ghostly projected himself beyond the grave, or wherever vampires ended up when they died. Like magic had been casted, the traffic ahead of them had began to flow once more. The taxi driver accelerated fastidiously which caught Will off guard. He held onto his seat beat as the taxicab maneuvered through cars like they were but mirages of the horizon. The ambulance nearby sped in the opposite direction as though an accident never occurred.

Will needed to check his sanity as he couldn’t have been hallucinating the entirety of that conversation. Yet, he tingled at the foreboding warning that something was amiss, and the sarcophagus somewhere in the city was the direct cause of the tension. Will would need to get home and hopefully Brian was there so he could relay what his sire warned him. The taxi driver maneuvered several more corners till Will’s apartment was on feet away. He quickly unbuckled himself and thanked the taxi driver for his impeccable driving skills.

The taxi driver was long gone by the time Will walked up the steps to his apartment. On either side of him, not a soul loitered out in Baltimore’s cold. The familiar, glowing red sign

of the blood bank several meters away called to him like a lone beacon casted over the ocean. He could use a drink though he wasn't too parched. He walked off the front steps of the building and towards the blood bank. A drink would preoccupy his mind away from the dissonance that was his deteriorating sanity.

The rats scurrying in the sewers below trailed him as the grime-slickened sidewalks became a gilded carpet. Will had become accustomed to the city's lifeblood that he didn't want to leave this place. The denizens, alive and dead, wasn't without their faults or attributes. He'd seen the worst of people in Baltimore, but it wasn't entirely different than any other place Will had ever lived. After all, the city was a concrete jungle of liars, vampires, and dead things. On his way to the blood bank, he heard the clattering of hooves on the pavement. He looked forward to see a trailing path of darkened feathers staining the way which undoubtedly, Will thought he imagined. He shook his head and kept the blood bank as his focus.

However, his focus was torn away by the shrill cry accompanied by commotion happening at the end of the feather trail. Will paused as the cries were of a feminine nature, but pained and fearful as the commotion became a violent orchestra of overturned trash bins and wet squelches. Against his intuition, and perhaps his healing wounds, Will followed the trail of feathers into a turning alleyway. The smell of blood was instant followed by Will's repulse.

He shielded his nose with the back of his hand as either side of the alleyway was slickened in blood and gore. Ahead of him, a great, heaving black beast with feathers covering every inch of it, saved for the twisted horns sprouting from its skull bellowed on the ground. Will swallowed and crept closer as the visage of feathers had morphed in front of his very eyes. He thought to rub his eyes raw again, but the smell of freshly spilled blood made his ravenous hunger stir.

I'm better than this.

Will scolded himself as he leaned down to dip his fingers into a puddle of blood. It was still warm to the touch although it was cooling against the cooling asphalt. He lifted his fingers to feel the blood squelching between them. He looked again to where the beast glared at him with darkened eyes, almost, pleading with him to end its misery. The beast had a heartbeat that was a slow, heavy out-of-rhythm tune. He tasted the blood on his fingers, and it was bitterly sour and poisoned with fear. The beast groaned helplessly as Will approached on hand and knee to where it laid dying on the asphalt. A magnificent beast though far from any forest it may have dwelled.

Will had seen his fair share of bucks upon the various hunting trips he had with his father, but never did he see such a beast covered in feathers. He hovered over the beast for a few moments, gauging how the beast's chest rose and fell in considerable pain, before wafting his nose over the congealing wound under his neck.

At the rate the beast was bleeding, it would expire within the hour. Will couldn't help but lean further in to tentatively draw his tongue across the oozing wound. The beast huffed and attempted to deter Will from tasting it's royal vintage, but it was powerless to the vampire tasting the wound. His curious laps became a shallow drink, then a hungry gulp. Will raised his head away as the blood dribbled from out his mouth. He shouldn't be doing this or was he entirely sure he was consciously doing this, but he was compelled into the violent delight.

His vision faltered momentarily into a black fog. He fell back on his bottom and scrubbed his eyes with his hands. They burned with unimaginable fury that it felt they would boil out his sockets. He groaned loudly and as he felt tinges of hot tears drip freely. Upon the burning sensation subsiding and his vision returning, he was horrified that he was not in fact drinking from an injured, black stag, but from a girl convulsing against the asphalt.

Will regurgitated much of the blood he consumed just as the girl murmured something unintelligible with her shallow, strangled breaths. He lunged for her as he noticed it was her neck that profusely bled out. Her torso had long, claw-like streaks reminiscent to the ones Will had seen beforehand. The fiend, or fiends, that injured this poor girl so did out of callous sadism, and not for nourishment. A passing monster that took advantage of her, then spoiled her, and now left her to die.

Will held her neck tightly to keep anymore blood from gushing out as he slowly recognized her. She was the same girl he saw when he encountered Knox at the blood clinic, though much of her face was obscured by her hair and the darkness of the night. In the faint light of the alleyway, she was beautiful. Her face was slightly freckled and reddened by the cold, but nevertheless, there was life still clinging to her body.

Will couldn't comprehend what he should do. He didn't want her to die. He looked around for anything he could use to bandage her wound, but it was futile as more blood was gushing from between his whitened knuckles.

Please don't die.

Will used one of his hands to lift the young woman into his embrace as the other kept its unrelentless grip onto the bleeding wound. He attempted to lift her, but with only the use of one hand, she almost fell out of his grasp. He stumbled and used his knee as a crutch to keep her from falling. The task was considerably harder than what it appeared to be and Will reluctantly had to put her down. He felt powerless as the girl's eyes were opened, glassy and shrouded in shock, and desperately looked at Will. They were reminiscent to the same eyes he had when he pleaded for Hannibal to spare his life.

I can't let you die.

Will thought of what Knox had shared with him in regards to his creation; initiating a blood bond between the vampire and the receiver. He looked to his wrist, then back to the woman dying in his arms, and against his own judgement, he lifted his wrist and bit down *hard*. His own blood slurred out from the puncture mark his fangs left behind and he quickly hovered it over the girl's face. It dripped down onto her parted lips, down her cheeks, and over her eyes. His self-inflicted wound healed on its own accord, but enough of his vitality had stained down on the woman below.

"Please, don't die.", Will caught himself sobbing. "I don't want you to die."

She was an innocent in a city filled with wickedness. He didn't want her to die or did he think she deserved to die. In a way, she was much like him and if he had a second chance, he would've liked to believe he would've survived his human life. The woman underneath him gasped and shuddered as the blood on her lips was whisked by her tongue darting the

moisture off her lips. Her eyes rolled back, and Will only watched in horror as a series of changes happened before his very eyes. The blood that was gushing into his palms slowed just as the wounds across her torso had sutured themselves back together. It was very much like a horror movie, although it was Will that was in the movie, rather than in the audience. However, the effects were short-lived as soon as life seemed to return to her, Will heard her heartbeat abruptly stop.

Initially, he was stunned, but then he was left mourning as the woman in his arms ceased all movements except for the familiar death rattle. His efforts were in vain and there he was, bloodied, worn-out and cradling a corpse. He had not the tears to cry or the voice to mourn. He only held her in his arms as the life was gone from her eyes.

“I’m sorry…”, Will said softly. “Oh, I’m so sorry…”

He couldn’t leave her in the alleyway. Though there was no dirt to lay her body to rest, Will thought of to take her back to the apartment, at least till Brian returned. Though he didn’t know he would explain a corpse on their couch, it would be a disservice to her to leave her discarded like trash. He picked her up soundly into his arms and walked out the alleyway, cautious of lingering eyes, before sneaking back towards the apartment building. To his relief, someone must’ve entered before him as the front doors were unlocked and he was able to slip inside the foyer. Upstairs, he tiptoed until he was at his front door. He tried to reach for his key squared away in his pocket, and once he fished it, he carefully unlocked the door with his dominant hand.

Inside, he quickly laid the woman’s corpse onto the couch and shut the door behind him. He ran his bloodied hands through his hair as he paced from the kitchen, to the living room, and back again. She was truly a corpse as he couldn’t smell the life on her, let alone hear the faintest of heartbeats echo in his chest. He was caught in a hard place between trying what Knox had suggested once more or allowing her to remain at death’s end. Will considered himself even crazier for bringing a corpse back.

He went to the refrigerator to drown his nervousness away, but upon opening it, he heard a starving gasp followed by a cry. He looked over the refrigerator door to see the once-corpse, upright and bewildered. The young woman was clutching her neck just as she caught Will’s terrified gaze. Her mouth gaped to scream, but Will sped to her side at the couch to cover it.

“Don’t.”, he warned. “Scream.”

The young woman blinked once, twice, then closed her eyes as a bloodied tear squelched between Will’s fingers. He slowly lifted his hand from her mouth just as she closed her lips tight. She swallowed and fearfully looked at Will as if he had been the embodiment of horror. He was none of that, in fact, he was perhaps the kinder of faces she’d seen this night. Relieved that for whatever magics were bound, it worked as the woman was very much alive though very much in shock.

“You’re okay.”, Will attempted to comfort her as he slowly backed away from her. “You aren’t dead anymore.”

The woman seemed to be alarmed at Will's revelation at her past condition and she scrunched up in terror. Will kicked himself for his wordplay as the young woman scrambled to her feet, though she fell against the coffee table as in her frenzied attempt to escape, it seemed her body had forgotten how to move gracefully. She landed on her knees with a grunt and patiently, the fledgling watched her regained her footing. He could attempt an introduction, or at least share his name, before the woman escaped.

He was elated however at the fact he crafted a ghoul, not just saved a life, but continued a life cut short. He didn't know the entire physicality of ghouls, and it would come at a later time, preferably once Brian returned, but he couldn't help but swell knowing he saved the woman's life.

"My name is Will Graham.", he introduced, eyeing how the woman could hardly keep herself standing without the help of the couch. "I saved your life."

The woman looked at him from over her shoulders with her big, blue eyes filled to the brim with tears. She sniffled with redness staining her face flushed. She wiped her ears with the back of her sleeve and flopped back down on the couch. Between her sobs, she hiccupped and attempted to fumble her words together.

"Abigail…", her sweet voice cooed. "My name is Abigail."

Will softened and carefully walked around the other side of the couch. He sat on the opposite end just as Abigail smeared her tears around. She looked at Will through her sobs, but it wasn't a look of fear anymore, rather out of need for security. He had been the same way at some point as he too was violently ravaged by violence he hadn't known before. Abigail was no different.

"Do you remember what happened?"

Abigail paused and averted her gaze down towards her torso. She felt the raised scars that started at her breast and ended at her navel. She herself seemed confused, or rather, disheartened at her condition. Her face scrunched into hopelessness and Will made a notion not to further her duress.

"I'm sorry.", he apologized. "I wish I would've caught the monster that did this to you."

She nodded and brought her coat tighter around her to cover her wounds. Her tears took on a lightly pink hue to them, just like Will's did whenever he cried, and she sucked in her bottom lip. She looked around the apartment and took inventory of the space. She looked back towards Will.

"Are you a monster, Mr. Graham?", she asked innocently.

He hesitated to answer as being a vampire, it left the open-ended question of whether he was inherently a monster. Sure, he needed human blood to maintain his lifestyle, and even then, his sources of blood often weren't curated from a pacifist viewpoint. He thought of himself as a neutral actor in a very cruel, and wicked world filled with darkness, but his night affliction ever so brought him closer to the brink of feeling a primality he hadn't thought he had.

On the other hand, he wasn’t like the monsters wearing flesh suits like the Prince or the Baroness. He didn’t deceive or hunt for sport. Will didn’t indulge in murder because it excited him or did he like inflicting pain upon others unless it was self-defense. If he was truly a monster, he was a monster with a conscious and not to be fed purely on ravenous, unchecked cravings for violence. He buried a hand into his growing curls and sighed. He targeted his stare at Abigail which must’ve frightened her as she cowered at the other end of the couch.

“*Yes*.”

Chapter End Notes

Everything comes full circle. And please don't talk to headless men during your Uber ride.

Thanks for the support.

Post Mortem

Chapter Summary

Abigail regrets leaving her home, Hannibal comes to terms with his self, and Matthew reflects on the series of events he's caused.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for descriptions of blood, animal death, and referenced cannibalism. Please take caution while continuing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XXIII

“Post-Mortem”

Her throat burned. The hoarseness that scratched the delicate sheets of flesh inside made her instinctively swallow between breaths. Abigail lightly tapped at the raised wound on her neck as she was alone in the bathroom, although not alone entirely, as Will was outside, perhaps listening in on her. He’d shown her the bathroom. Everything she needed was already inside: towels, soap, and solitude. The change of clothes he provided was much too large, and rather masculine for her frame, but she wanted to be out of her viciously torn attire. What little that was left wrinkled around her ankles in bloodied pieces. Her coat was saved from her attack, a bitterly warm reminder to her assault as it pooled nearby on the tiled floor.

Her reflection in the mirror showcased her dreary condition; blood caked from her face to belly. Her hair tangled in a mixture of grime and gore. Her cheeks were void of the familiar reddish blush she sported especially on nights cold as this. There was a tinge of red to the whites of her eyes and a slight delay of her blinking. Her teeth tingled and her gums looked bleached. Her once freckled; fawn-tinted skin had paled. Goose flesh trailed up and down her skin though she couldn’t say she was cold. She never had been attentive or unnecessarily ashamed of her looks, but she was aware of the changes. She wrote it off as leftover gore.

In her nudeness, the scars she endured raked her body haphazardly like a rake. They were sutured to her skin though the wounds didn’t hurt. She dragged her fingers down from her neck, across her chest, and down to her stomach. As grievous as the raised, pink scars were, she was miraculously alive. By what grace, she couldn’t say, but Will had proclaimed he saved her.

She couldn't be saved for as far she'd fallen, the bottom had become home.

Though much of her life she'd been sheltered in the warmth, often the cadence of her mundane, suburban upbringing, it was her desire to fly away from the nest that resulted in her leaving safety and into a mauling. She didn't mean to buy that train ticket, or pack her bag, or even worry her parents, though the latter was often a daily occurrence. She skipped church, whenever she could, and more often than what her mother would've liked. School was an equally dreadful prison as many eyes within her omnipotent community reported her for the littlest of transgressions. Her extracurriculars were normal; choir, debate, and track. Her weekends were either hunting trips or Sunday picnics; though the hunting trips had became the norm over deviled eggs and tuna fish sandwiches. The contingent normalcy of her life bored her.

Abigail was anxious to wade her feet in the water. She wanted to see a world far different than the one she'd been accustomed to; kept away from. Abigail began to loathe her lonesome abode and how troubling as her parents' resolve of keeping her in their house forever, and Baltimore seemed the place to abscond to. Her friends, long gone and off to better pastures, seemed to live the life she desperately craved, no, *fantasized* in her dreams.

Because at least in those dreams, she was *free*.

City-life amazed her for the most part; sightseeing and delving into the culture. The traffic, loudness, and cluttered atmosphere was a stark contrast to her close-knitted, hush-hush hometown. Underage for most ventures, Abigail had found solace in exploring the concrete maze ways that was Baltimore's streets. She kept her wits about her for the most part as she wasn't gullible in believing every stranger was a friend or would allow herself to wander into trouble. For the most part, she was left alone to wander and experience. The asphalt under her feet felt as familiar as the grass that sprouted in her backyard.

Although she came well-prepared financially, she couldn't be prepared or equipped for the violence she suffered.

Her attacker had been quick, scary even as how quick he was. Abigail hadn't been encumbered by anything other than her ignorance. She'd saw him only once just before he disemboweled her, toying in her gore, and escaping the carnage. Her world view was of the night sky and how void it was of stars, and how the moon seemed to taunt her being up so high, safe from the world below. She hadn't felt a pain so horrible till she felt her neck gush onto the asphalt and her chest rendered into strips.

It'd be a fitting demise, Abigail thought as she lied there bleeding, as many hunting trips with her father she bore witness to death.

She was never a fan of the hunting trips and they became increasingly frequent more her father delved into his sadistic hobby. There was something menacingly cold about hunting that Abigail couldn't stomach. Fishing she could tolerate, birdwatching was peaceful, but being behind the bow and feeling the arrow release from her fingers sent her into a catatonia. She hadn't realized how desensitized she became to hunting until her father made her look at where her arrow pierced.

Look. Her father would force her neck to crane down at their hapless victim. He would never hurt her, but his tight grip was forever seared into Abigail's memory. *See the life fade from the eyes*.

Abigail could never look, much to her father's disappointment, but oh could she smell the blood, feel it on her hands, and squelch underneath her boots. No matter how many times she would wash her hands, or submerge herself into bathwater, the smell of death wafted off her like a warning, perhaps as intimidation to those who'd hunt her instead.

The amount of deer she had slaughtered drowned her, but it was always her father at the water's edge keeping her under. In her nightmares, her father was the one who gave chase, and she, ran like the frightened doe she was. Her chest would burn in exertion. Her dainty legs could only reach out so far as the thickened, overgrown floor would try to trip her along the way. Her father was always close and never played fair. She was an animal, he, the hunter and his bow and arrow were scornful pair. She could never escape for when the arrow pierced her heart, she laid dying with her blood pooling around her. Her last visage would be of her father slicing her neck. Upon waking up, she felt her neck dry and unbelievably tender.

Abigail swallowed as she turned away from her reflection. Often would her scar bear remembrance to her past, but she wouldn't subject herself to remembering her father or his hunting trips. For all the depravity he wallowed in, Abigail still loved her father. Much so now as she was in a strange man's bathroom with her scars partially healed, and much of her memory a cacophony of nothingness.

If she could return home, even for a moment, she'd hug her mother and father both for all the distress she caused them. Abigail teared up and caught herself about to sob, though she muffled it with her hand, as she was almost certain Will would've heard her. However, the doorknob didn't turn or did she hear a knock rap at the door.

She turned to the shower behind her. She stepped inside the pristine tub, fiddled with the handles for the water, and shivered once the cool spray flushed over her. The water was a welcoming relief as the grime, blood, and her regrets swirled down the drain. She threaded her hands through her hair and soon, the darkened locks lightened into their familiar shade of auburn. Her scars tingled under the coldness of the spray. She closed her eyes briefly the darkness was all but her own.

Something gnawed at her as she stood in the shower's spray, though she thought it was her nerves still fried from shock. But, the feeling persisted and it was unbearable to ignore. It felt as if ants trickled down her arms and legs. She tried to shake the feeling by stepping further into the shower's spray. Her eyes fluttered droplets off her eyelids as she continued her shower. The water kept itself at a steady pressure, but the water seemed to get increasingly warm. The feeling had become urgent and she couldn't help but open her eyes again. Abigail looked down and her eyes widened beyond their sockets.

Her feet pooled with thick, lapping torrents of blood, much darker, and warmer than the water. The water that once sprayed from the showerhead slushed blood from her head down to her feet. Naturally, she was terrified as she couldn't keep her grip or calmness in the shower. She was to turnabout to escape, but her legs gave out from underneath her and she collapsed into the tub. Blood rose into her mouth and blinded her. She felt as if she was

drowning as more blood began to overfill the tub, flowing liberally from the faucets, and oozing out from the tiles. Her arms couldn't seem to find the shower's panel, or could they reach for anything that would free her from the sanguine murk she was suffocating in. The blood around her was like liquid iron; unrelenting in their watery grasp upon her.

Look. Abigail thought she heard her father mocking her. *Look how helpless you are*.

She screamed, but it was only blood that muffled her cry. The blood was up over her chin, threatening to obscure past her eyes, and the fight was leaving her. She allowed the blood to swathe down her throat as she remained motionless at the bottom of the tub. It was oddly comforting as the blood warmed and rocked her into the easiness of the inevitable demise. She thought of home, in this moment, and very much of her parents and how distraught they must've been.

The bottom wasn't as bad as the top, Abigail's vision blotched with red and black, and this time, she didn't want to be saved.

She didn't hear the door being torn from its hinges, or register the shower being turned off, or a loud, persistent voice in her ears. The blood comforted her much like her parents' love for her, or a warm dinner, even like the scarves her father crafted for him from their hunts. Though she felt herself wretched from the bottom, it wasn't until she saw Will did she see herself at the top. She audibly gurgled as fresh breath filled her lungs instead of blood. She was still in the shower while Will held her up. The floodwater had slushed out the sides of the tub and made squishy puddles around them. Abigail was grasping on Will's forearm, almost like a death grip, as the visions of blood pouring from the faucets and the tiles were no more and she had been submerged in pristine water.

"I got you.", Will said to her as he rocked them both. "Stay with me."

Abigail was unsure she could. Her throat burned as she sputtered water up. Will kept her head at an angle to expunge much of the water that filled her lungs. She looked around to see that the blood was gone and it was just herself, Will, and water all around them. The blood had been a hallucination, or better yet, an imagined scenario from her hunting days. Her breaths came in shaky, strangling inhales as she stared blanky into the water beginning to slush down the drain. She was trembling and she felt the coldness settle into her bones.

"Abigail.", Will said again. "Abigail, can you hear me?"

Yes. Abigail wanted to say but her lips couldn't seem to form the word.

"Listen to me—", her rescuer cooed. "It'll be okay."

It would never been okay.

Everything that'd happened hadn't be okay in the slightest, as Abigail was once ripped to shreds, and she thought she was drowning in blood. Will, however, didn't seem to be alarmed or panicked, rather, he was composed and attentive to her strife. He couldn't see the blood like she did. She thought she was going to die. Will, on the other hand, gave her condition the

attention she hadn't known before. Unlike her parents, he wasn't oblivious to what she felt inside and Abigail felt some relief off her shoulders.

"Are you listening?", Will asked her again, pushing some of her wet locks out from her face. "It wasn't *real*."

She was listening, of course, as her ears still had the ability to decipher sound. Though it was a far cry when it came to her reality as she was a thousand miles away from herself and Will. The blood wasn't real and Abigail had to remind herself of that as the last of the water slushed down the drain.

She hadn't felt so anxious since her haunting dreams of her father hunting her down. Will stopped rocking them and looked at her with a sorrowful gaze to his eyes. Abigail met his eyes and lucidity had returned to her own.

His eyes were trimmed in a golden glaze and as unnatural they seemed to be to her, she hadn't felt so comforted in looking at a person, let alone a stranger in so long. In his eyes, she found her solace. A smile quivered on her lips just as Will softened into a relieved smile. Her hand went up to curl around his neck. He rose and Abigail felt like a feather in his arms. There was a remarkable strength she didn't consider in Will as he was much like her in physique; slender, but not too toned. He carried her out the bathroom and down a hallway. It was dark, but Will's eyes seemed to glow.

She was sat upon a bed much to her comfort and respite for her agitated nerves. The water still dribbling down her skin left her shaking, but Will covered her nudity with a shirt hanging nearby. She gratefully took the shirt as it was a shield between herself and him. After all, she was still a woman, and he, a stranger and a man. Will didn't look at her twice, rather, he cautiously hovered away from her.

As if he was afraid of her.

Abigail was more terrified of Will than she was of him, since as forementioned, he was a self-proclaimed monster. Outwardly, he was a man, but in the inside, Abigail didn't know whether it was a façade for his second skin. He didn't have claws or gnashing teeth like her attacker, but she couldn't help but theorize there was something under the skin. He was beautiful for man and she couldn't help but feel a stab of jealously. There was a softness to his features, almost nymph-like, as he eyed her warily from the shadows. What made him a monster, Abigail hadn't figured it out, but he was no more a monster than she a killer. It was like finding a needle in a haystack if the haystack was on fire.

He was indecipherable.

Yet, he was heroic for what he did for her. Even on the brink of death, he was there, keeping her from slipping under. Abigail remembered little of Will except that his mouth was bloodied, but he was there attempting to save her life. His hand on her neck reminded her much of father's, though the latter was often calculated, Will's was benevolent. She would thank him for rescuing her though that memory of events were clouded.

“I should let you rest.”, commented Will. “I’d like to speak to you tomorrow night, if that’s alright with you.”

Tomorrow night.

Abigail began to question why not the morning, but before she could ask, Will slithered out the room and shut the door behind him. Abigail was alone in the darkness, save for the moon peering through the darkened panes. She swung her legs onto the bed and laid back. She needed some rest after her dilemma, and she hoped she wouldn’t dream of bloody bathtubs, or her entrails swung around like jump ropes. The bed was comfortable enough and the blankets softer as she tucked herself in. She threw the shirt Will had given her down to the floor as it was much warmer, and secure under the duvet. She whispered her nightly prayer although she was skeptical some benevolent being would answer them.

A quirk from her Sunday school days.

She wished not to dream of her father, or of dead deer, and with her prayer sent, she counted her breaths.

Dream. Abigail heard her father’ hushed voice as her breathing slowed. *Dream, little doe*.

He sat in the dark, much to his own peace of mind, rather than out of avoidance to light. Darkness allowed him to think deeper; something he hadn’t had the luxury of doing as of late. He enjoyed his regained solitude, but his conversation with Will left him craving for more. He could summon the fledgling again – the phone on his desk looked rather tempting. The Prince contemplated. He disagreed, for Will’s own sanity, as their conversation was still raw with salt in the wound. Hannibal had tortured him enough. They both needed the time and space.

The fledgling tried his hardest to undermine Hannibal, and it would’ve worked had Hannibal faltered. However, he was a creature of routine; his façade was practically impenetrable.

Or so he thought.

Hannibal naturally recomposed himself as he couldn’t falter his demeanor on a whim, specifically with Will Graham. Malkavians were insightful, if not horribly misconstrued about their states of reality, though Will’s clarity was sharpening every night. Hannibal was not to be unraveled by a mere Malkavian, a sireless fledgling at that, not if he had anything to say about it.

Who are you really? The question fixated Hannibal as he sat behind his desk.

The Prince didn’t think much of himself outside of regality, or his Ventrue pedigree, and never of his former humanity. Rather, it was a defense mechanism to keep all this inner, most secretive of feelings stored far away from enemies that would bleed him dry if they smelled weakness. Bedelia knew of the emotions he could fake; delight and disappointment, but she would never know the extent of Hannibal’s depth. As with this, he couldn’t place his trust in

her. He grimaced. He was of many things, but seemingly he was at a pause when Will questioned him.

Who am I really?

Hannibal crossed his legs and tapped viciously on the desk. Indeed, it was nerve-wrecking as the question was open-ended; never to have an absolute answer. He was *the* Hannibal Lecter, the esteemed Prince of Baltimore, and a creature of the night. And yet, here he was, in the throes of a philosophical crisis.

Hannibal paused his thoughts.

For now, the Prince would settle his nerves upon resuming work. In particular, the urgency of his pet ghoul, Chilton, and the message he sent hours beforehand. He skimmed over the email to find the body of it to be no particular interest, except for the file attached underneath. His tablet opened the video with a pristine feedback of a security recording. The contents of the video piqued his interest.

He bounced his leg as he reviewed the attached video religiously. The Prince couldn't help to be enamored by the feedback of the great sarcophagus, the gilded box that made all his hair stand at attention, shake and sputter with gore pouring from underneath its lid. Hannibal was disappointed there was no audio, of course given it was a feedback, but to watch the sinister box gush out blood and gore was sickly entertaining.

Chilton was frantic, naturally, as something as horrifying as watching the sarcophagus consume flesh was especially out of his forte. Chilton was responsible in providing Hannibal his selected nourishment, nothing more, and nothing less unless the Prince had a specific cause. The many years Hannibal had the displeasure of having Frederick as his ghoul, he hadn't seen him unsettled like he portrayed in his email.

Yet, Hannibal was delighted. The sarcophagus was *alive*. He held his superstitions about the contents with the sarcophagus being old bones, dusty tomes, or the ominous deadly curse. He didn't imagine it'd be something inside that could eat, let alone feast itself upon the blood and gore consciously.

Dark forces were at work and it'd fled the shores of Los Angeles, much to Lacroix's ignorance, or perhaps fear. The Princeling had no right to be furious at Hannibal for keeping the sarcophagus away from him. Prince Lacroix seemed to be liberal enough to let the sarcophagus depart from his western shores, but then again, that was before discovering that the sarcophagus was more than just a decorative coffin. Hannibal saw why. The sarcophagus was more than just a forgotten relic from the old world, rather, it was a dangerous boon that held something Hannibal, or any other vampire, couldn't begin to comprehend.

The Prince stopped the playback of the video and closed his tablet.

Under any circumstances, the sarcophagus would have to remain shuttered. Hannibal thought of a thousand reasons why he shouldn't subject himself, or his city, to what resided hungrily in that gilded box. He did, however, want to keep Lacroix at heel and if the sarcophagus remained in his possession, the Princeling would keep his distance. The Camarilla would

most likely get wind that the sarcophagus isn't empty as first perceived and Hannibal would have to pull strings, or cut strings, to keep his acquaintances from undermining his edict. He couldn't, on the punishment of a final death, allow any vampire to crack open the sarcophagus with himself included.

And he meant it.

The Prince made note to himself to contact Dr. Chilton again to ensure the sarcophagus would be moved from the vessel into the security of Baltimore's finest proprietors at the Natural History museum. Hannibal was a man of arts and culture and he held special privilege amongst the curators of Baltimore. He could secure safe passage of the sarcophagus to the Baltimore Natural History museum, but only if he could throw the most determined of bloodhounds off the trail. Currently, Baltimore P.D had the utmost authority over the *Elizabeth Dane* along with other local agencies, but Hannibal was an expert in persuasion, and could convince swathes of eyes to cast elsewhere. The press could be influenced to gossip elsewhere especially now with a serial killer leaving bloody bits in his wake.

With prying, human eyes obscured from the truth about the sarcophagus, he needed to employ his own set of eyes within the *Elizabeth Dane*. He couldn't necessarily have his personnel storm the vessel and commandeer the sarcophagus from the hull; it'd cause too much unnecessary attention. It was not only him who wanted the sarcophagus for themselves.

He thought to send Will though his Anarch acquaintances would jump at the chance of crossing Hannibal. It'd be like dangling fresh meat in front of an enclosure of ravenous predators; too tempting not to take a bite. Matthew and his vagabonds would be beyond elated to steal the sarcophagus for their own ignorant means. If they held any intelligent speculation of how disastrous opening the sarcophagus would be, they would leave it to Hannibal to tuck it away.

As was their way of being a nuisance for the Camarilla, Hannibal had no doubt the Anarchs would attempt to unlock it.

Yet, Will was the only Malkavian he knew personally that could utilize his power of obfuscation. Boarding the ship would need subterfuge of the utmost precision, and Hannibal didn't want to trust such an important feat to a Nosferatu. Their innate, hideous appearance wouldn't settle well into blending in with the human population, if need be. Hannibal had a personal distaste for the Nosferatu, although he wouldn't publicly admit it, and they had a tendency to protect their own rather than be aligned wholeheartedly with the Camarilla.

The fledgling wouldn't be all too happy accepting another of Hannibal's tasks; first the serial killer and now the sarcophagus. It was a test of resilience, really, as Will seemed to know how to hold his own in fights. Or, survive them to learn another night. Investigating the sarcophagus would require no violence, as violence brought eyes, and eyes redirected back to Hannibal.

The Prince opened his tablet again to compose an email. Will wouldn't have gotten home so early to answer the phone, and Hannibal abhorred the Brujah currently shacked with the fledgling. He typed fastidiously and sent the message off. Exhaling, he stored his tablet back into his desk drawer.

The night was starting to morph into morning and Hannibal was possessed to retire. As his nocturnal lifestyle emphasized his biological need to go to ground at the turning of dawn, his work would have to resume the tomorrow night.

Hannibal snapped his fingers and his office illuminated in softening orange light. He loosened his tie and allowed it to droop lowly around his neck. There was much to plan and calculate as the sarcophagus was of Hannibal's responsibility. His enemies were watching as well as Camarilla associates. Every inch of Baltimore knew of the sarcophagus and the supernatural miasma it brought along with it. It would be of the greatest importance to hide it.

Until Hannibal could figure how to destroy it.

He would ponder the logistics of his plan in due time. Before retiring to bed, however, he had a more pressing matter in his kitchen. Outside his office, the penthouse was eerily silent save for Hannibal's footsteps. Bedelia was not around, much to Hannibal's disappointment, but it was he who was undeservingly cross with her. He would have to apologize to her, perhaps over dinner, but for now Hannibal kept distance. Jack, although unseen when Hannibal asked, seemingly avoided the penthouse entirely. Perhaps the guard felt the same coldness Hannibal exerted towards Bedelia.

In his kitchen, the space was immaculately clean. The harsh blue-white lights above him aired the kitchen as a refined, modern space without the encumbrance of clashing tastes. The floor tiles had been scrubbed to the point it shimmered, as well as the appliances, and the island counter was void of the smallest of specks. Hannibal dragged his finger along the island counter as he passed. His fingertip remained unblemished which pleased him.

His attention was turned towards the pantry although it was empty of foodstuffs and served more like Hannibal's need to fabricate normalcy.

Upon approaching pantry, a strangled cry echoed from within. Hannibal felt himself grinning as slowly, agonizingly, slowly he pulled the pantry doors apart. Inside, his preferred meal hung upside down like a butchered cow. His choice this evening was of a Toreador far too hedonistic for Hannibal to tolerate and too perverted for him to indulge in otherwise. A name had been forementioned, but Hannibal didn't think of the vampire of any importance to remember a name.

He was conscious as the Prince entered the walk-in pantry. In stark contrast to Hannibal, he was more of an artisan selection of cured meat rather than the more ragged types displayed in Baltimore. In his nudity, Hannibal could trail his eyes down the unblemished, well-pampered marbled flesh. Toreadors were well-kept by nature as beauty and glamour was their clan's strong suits. Not a mark or scar ruined the flesh, though the silver chains he was bound in created surface scars to be healed later, and Hannibal categorized the fine wrinkles and veins protruding just under the Toreador's skin.

The Prince approached closer, much to the Toreador's horror, as he struggled and fought in his silver-linked bondage. Blood had begun to pour from the lacerations the silver-linked chains made into the Toreador. The gag forced into the crevice of his mouth was unforgiving and only thick trails of salvia drooled down the Toreador's face and into his hair.

“Now, now.”, chided Hannibal, lowering down to meet the suspended Toreador at eye level. “Consider yourself lucky tonight, Toreador.”

The Toreador blinked cluelessly. Hannibal had acquired him the night before for his planned dinner but hadn’t marinated the Toreador long enough for the recipe the Prince wanted to try. If he were to serve Will the forbidden flesh that was of a vampire, he wanted it to be sublime. It was heaven when Hannibal first consumed flesh and Will’s experience had to be no different. The Toreador would need to be fed exquisite vintages to flavor his dead flesh, but in the meantime, Hannibal was content in not making the Toreador stress.

After all, stress *soured* the meat.

His victim looked much like Will, minus the darker eyes, and muscled physique. It was out of coincidence, not out of a specific whim as Hannibal cared little for outward appearances of his meats. Nor did he particularly desire to eat Will.

That, he was sure of.

The hanging Toreador mumbled something from behind their gag, but Hannibal couldn’t make out a syllable.

“I’m afraid I cannot butcher you tonight.”, the Prince coldly admitted, watching how the Toreador’s eyes became wide like saucers. “I don’t think I’m ready to let William in.”

Will couldn’t stomach being in Hannibal’s presence for more than what was allocated. The Toreador was bewildered at Hannibal’s reveal of his ulterior motives. It must’ve been a shock as vampires didn’t consume flesh, human or elsewise vampire, let alone talk about butchering meat. He struggled weakly, but the silver burned his immortal flesh and made more blood trail down his body. Though the burning scars would heal upon removing the silver, the Prince tasted the blood dripping in front of him. He caught droplets on his fingers and licked.

Strong. Hannibal catalogued the taste onto his palate. *Savory, even*.

Hannibal ran a hand through his slickened hair and looked over to the refrigerator in his kitchen. He had butchered enough to keep his appetite sated for the next few nights should he feel peckish. The Toreador would have to endure, at least for a few nights, until Hannibal could ease Will into his dark passion.

“He’s something I’d thought I never would have.”, Hannibal rose. “An equal, or at least, someone I could spend this dreadful eternity with.”

The Toreador sputtered underneath his gag and Hannibal felt himself growing disgusted. He slightly turned and crossed his arms. He didn’t know why he was venting out his thoughts aloud, but the Toreador wouldn’t survive his imprisonment, and Hannibal’s secrets would be safe. For once, he felt as though he was liberated enough to air his desires. He turned to look back down at the Toreador.

“As I’m a lonely creature…and, I don’t want to be lonely anymore.”

Hannibal paused as he felt his lips shudder. He hadn't felt them do so in a very long time, perhaps before he became an immortal. He brought his finger up to catch them and he pressed his lips into a frown.

That's unnatural of me. Hannibal thought as the Toreador suspended in front of him tousled in his chains. *But, it felt right.*

A burden had been lifted from his shoulders at the reveal of what bothered him the most; he was lonely. His human life came and gone, and immortality was all his to endure. He no longer had a family, or did he start one before becoming a vampire, and hadn't fathered childer on his own. Loneliness was a benign state, often a result of his boredom he didn't cure.

He hadn't thought much of seclusion as he was constantly surrounded by acquaintances, and personally involved with Bedelia, but it seemed just to be farce as truly, he was a miserable creature. He exhaled shakily and turned away from the Toreador.

This is who I am.

Hannibal left the pantry and didn't hesitate upon closing the doors behind him. He left out of his kitchen and upstairs into his bedroom. He was distressed as he rushed up the stairs to unwind himself.

Upon entering his bedroom, he was surprised, no, he was stunned with what he saw. Bedelia laid in his bed with her toned, supple flesh on display like the goddess she was reincarnated into. He stared at her blankly as he couldn't pick together words, let alone a gesture. Of course, he was glad to see her once again as he needed to apologize for his cruelty, and to calm his hysteria, but words seemed to have trouble forming at his lips. His companion grew uneasy in the gravity of his stare and instinctively covered her nudity with the thrown sheet.

"Hannibal?", she asked, seeing how he wasn't himself. "Is this improper of me?"

It wasn't as if he hadn't bore witness to her nudity many times, and now spontaneity, but he couldn't make his lips move. The Prince couldn't respond. He was caught off-guard and seemingly dipping into a state of catatonia. His legs carried him to get into the bed, much to Bedelia's concern, and her arms wrapped around him. She was warm compared to his deathly coolness. He shuddered and curled into his lover's embrace. Naturally, she rubbed calming circles into his back as he laid practically immobile into her lap.

"Oh, Hannibal.", Bedelia sighed. "Tell me what's wrong."

I'm wrong. Hannibal buried his face into Bedelia to shield the tears that was beginning to form in the crevices of his eyes.

He failed in bottling up the wetness in his eyes. Hannibal felt his reddened tears dribble down his face. How sickening it was of him to pride himself into being an unfeeling, remorseless creature of refinement. When in reality, the Prince was a sunken, misinterpreted reflection of his self-imposed isolation. He thought to make himself unobtainable to protect him from the

cutthroat politics of Baltimore, but as a consequence, he was alone and without an equal. And that *terrified* him.

He looked up to Bedelia with his face trailing bloody tears.

“You were right.”, he admitted, and his tears began to stain his dress shirt. “Bedelia, my love, you’ve been right this entire time.”

His lover was stunned as she never witnessed Hannibal in a state, let alone in tears.

“What have I been right about, my Prince?”, the question was innocent in nature, though Bedelia must’ve had a notion to what Hannibal was talking about.

After all, she was the one who accused him of his obsession with Will.

“You have to tell me what’s going on.”

He scoffed and wiped his tears away with the back of his hand. They smeared across his face, but he did not care.

Bedelia frowned.

“I cannot help you if you hide things from me.”, she warned. “Be transparent with me.”

But that’s all what Hannibal knew to do; hide. He had been programmed this way for his protection, and to secure his rights as a Prince of Baltimore. To lay his heart on the line was suicide.

“I’m obsessed again.”, he admitted. “I’m obsessed with something dangerous, as you said, and…Bedelia, I cannot let it go.”

The revelation didn’t outwardly phase or crack Bedelia, but it did make her stunned expression morph into victorious cynicism. She knew Hannibal like she knew herself and as much as Hannibal discredited her as much, he could admit he was wrong, and she was right. Will Graham was his obsession, not the crown, or Baltimore. His waking thoughts was of the fledgling whether Hannibal wished to think about him or not.

Bedelia pursed her lips and averted her gaze elsewhere.

“And what will you do about this obsession?”, she asked with her gaze focused onto the city’s skyline.

Hannibal hadn’t thought this far. Will Graham was his subject and at the mercy of his benevolent stay of execution. He had just cause to dispose of the fledgling on a moment’s whim though he wouldn’t be saved from the criticism the Anarchs, or the more sympathetic subjects of Baltimore. He flicked his tears away. He rose out of Bedelia’s lap and she shifted to sit with her back onto his pillows.

Because of Hannibal’s growing obsession with Will, he couldn’t bring himself to carry out the execution and be done with it. It would haunt him till the end of his nights. As to dwell on

what happened meant an immortality of regret.

He wanted to make a progeny out of Will at first, but now, Hannibal was in crisis. He needed Will and his Malkavianism for his political ventures, but to also sate the growing, wallowing pit of unhappiness that was brewing within him. The Prince couldn't decipher whether he wanted Will more like a childe, or as a lover, or as a meal.

He tightened a scowl upon his lips and slid a hand under Bedelia's chin. He forced her to look at him and his lover did as such. There was a degree of skepticism in her eyes, and Hannibal read it fully. No matter what answer he gave her, she wouldn't be satisified. The Prince's scowl turned upside down as his paramour awaited his answer on bated breath.

"I think I want to let him in."

Matthew sat at the foot of his bed with his gun between his legs. The music downstairs had been muted much to Freddie's vexing as they needed no further excitement for the night. Patrons had been cleared except for those who were Anarch-aligned. The bullet holes downstairs had been covered momentarily with tarp as well as the dead Gangrel's ashes, swept, and thrown away unceremoniously. He looked at the gun with an abhorrence, almost with hatred, as the gun was still empty and knocked back from the last bullet. His hands had stopped trembling hours ago, but the event was still very much alive behind his eyes.

Brian had wretched the gun from his only after Matthew collapsed downstairs. The Brujah only gave it back to him after ensuring Matthew wasn't going to reload it. Matthew wasn't going too; he didn't trust himself with a loaded gun at this moment.

There was a troublesome throbbing on the side of the Anarch's head as he sat upright in his bed. He hadn't remembered being carried to his bedroom, or anything that took place after he shot the Gangrel dead. It was like a hangover but instead Matthew was painfully sober, and he had been slammed against a concrete wall. A beer had been left abandoned by his feet and a cigarette in the ashtray had burnt itself out. It was only Matthew and the gun between his legs in his darkened, lonesome room.

He didn't mean to pull the trigger, really, but his rage had boiled over as often as it did when he was a younger vampire. His newborn days were of street fights and bloodied knuckles. A simpler, less Anarch time in his life.

Brian had warned him on many occasions to cap his anger, and cap Matthew did, but his Brujah ancestry was riddled with anger. Not to mention that Matthew held the fury of hundreds of vampires on the streets, in their hovels, and in the city, if not the entire state of Maryland. He laid back on the bed and sighed. The blood still caked up on his shirt, his face, and gunpowder residue dusting his hands was a bitter reminder he was not above his anger.

Matthew scrubbed his face with his soiled hands. He was stupid for shooting that Sabbat, but he didn't necessarily regret it – the Gangrel had it coming. Matthew gave the Gangrel a chance to escape with his life, but no, the Gangrel just had to insinuate that his mentor, *the* Nines Rodriguez, was some kind of coward. The Anarch seethed.

Nines was the bravest vampire he knew.

The chain of reactions he undoubtedly caused would haunt him later, if not for the rest of his nights, and that was what he regretted. He knowingly brought all the Sabbat's eyes upon not just himself, but Freddie, Brian, and every other vampire in Baltimore. Nines wouldn't have shot the Sabbat let alone entertained them as long as Matthew did. Nines was more of a 'rough play' kind of man; his fists did the talking.

Matthew cringed as the thought of his predecessor scolding him for his unimaginable mistake. With all that Nines had thought him about being an Anarch first, and a Brujah second, Matthew was a natural-born jackass. He was rash, something Nines had told him night after night, and unapologetically stubborn. Matthew held a stubbornness long before he was made into a vampire. Had his mentor been here, the Sabbat wouldn't have been able to walk into the *Last Call* let alone be able to walk out to tell the tale, well, at least two of them.

Yet, Nines wasn't here, and Matthew had left the nest decades ago.

The Anarch heard his bedroom door open which made him pause his mental flogging. From the doorway, Brian had stood with his own cigarette curled against his lips. Unspoken tension wafted between the two Brujahs before Matthew laid his back down onto the bed.

"I know I fucked up.", admitted Matthew as he stared up at the ceiling. "You don't have to remind me."

"Wasn't going to.", Brian responded and stood in front of Matthew lying on his bed. "I just came to say good night."

"You're leaving?", Matthew knew Brian's responsibilities led him elsewhere. "I shouldn't keep you then."

Brian picked up the beer near the Anarch's foot and took a sip. He grimaced and sat it back down.

"Beer's hot.", he complained.

Matthew shrugged. He wasn't in the mood for beer, or any drink for that matter.

"Sorry.", the Anarch grumbled. "Not finding myself particularly thirsty tonight."

The Brujah made a 'hmph' sound as he took inventory on the state of Matthew's cluttered room. Abandoned beer bottles, the occasional pair of jeans, and decades old stacks of Playboys was the least important to Matthew.

"Will you be alright?", Brian extinguished his cigarette into the ashtray nearby. He picked up a Playboy and skimmed through the pages. "I can stay if you want."

"I'm good, thanks.", Matthew sat upright to look at his friend. He smiled though it pained him as he didn't want to smile, rather, he wanted to scream. He didn't want Brian crooning over him for the rest of the night. Freddie was enough at it was.

“Go check in on the fledgling for me.”

“Right.”, Brian threw the Playboy back onto its respective pile and dipped his head. “I’ll call you later.”

Matthew watched Brian turn around and go back towards the door, but the older Brujah paused in the doorway.

“Don’t blame yourself for anything, Matt.”, the Brujah suggested. “We don’t.”

Matthew had a trail of blame behind him and shooting the Sabbat was the newest. He scrunched up his face to scowl, but it laxed into an exhale. Freddie and Brian would be by his side, now and forever, regardless of the path of action he took. That, he was eternally grateful for. He regretted getting his friends involved into his shitstorm of a life, but Brian and Freddie wouldn’t leave him out the dry. It would take more than a couple of Sabbat lunatics to sever the bond they formed.

“Thanks.”, the Anarch echoed. “I’m glad you guys have my back.”

“Always.”, with that, Brian closed Matthew’s door and the Anarch was left in shadows and silence.

Matthew scoffed and laid back down. He’d have to worry another night. Missing primogens, doomed sarcophagi, and a Prince breathing down his neck, and now vampire cult fanatics was enough as it was. He drifted into a lightened sleep as he couldn’t peacefully retire with the way his nerves was. If he were to dream, he hoped it was for a better Baltimore.

Or a better time, when he was young, and naïve about the nature of the cruel world that was of darkness.

Chapter End Notes

By default, ghouls (i.e Abigail) take on traits of their blood donors (i.e Will's Malkavanism). I'm basing their relationship more like Heather Poe and the fledgling from Bloodlines and from the tv show.
Hannibal is a terrible liar. Do you want to eat Will, make him your vampire boyfriend, or would you rather just kill him and be done with it?
Yes, these vampires cry blood like the vampires in True Blood. I just think it's neat.
I truly don't know how hunting works, but I'm sure a bow and arrow can kill a full-grown deer just as much as a hunting rifle. I kept going back in forth debating whether Abigail and Hobbs hunted with just a bow and arrow, or they used guns.

I think about this song alot whenever I write Matthew.
Pressure Cracks by Grieves

Please take my survey linked to the end notes. Keep my work skin indent on since Word is notorious for messing up format once I get this onto AO3. See you next update.

Presence

Chapter Summary

Abigail can't seem to sleep. Bedelia comes to terms with her changing relationship with Hannibal. Will is revisited by an unwelcomed associate.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings for mentions of blood, gore, and vomit. Please continue with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XXIV

“Presence”

Abigail was restless. She was unable to stay asleep as she couldn’t help but stir anxiously throughout the night. She tried turning over onto her side, but then found it uncomfortable as the gash on her neck throbbed, and then she turned to sleep on her stomach. That proved to be equally troublesome as the slashes on her stomach ached. The blanket around her became suffocating and it pooled at the end of the bed. The pillow underneath her head had become sodden with a combination of her sweat and tears.

Early. Abigail eyed a nearby clock reading the time to be a quarter till seven.

As she lied in bed, the hopes of going back to sleep was all but wishful thinking. Eventually, she decided to sit upright just as dawn came and gone. The sun was obscured by darkened storm clouds, but it made little difference as the bedroom was still a sphere of darkness.

I’m cold, Abigail ran her hands up her prickled arms. *Have I always been this cold?*

She swung her legs over to the side of the bed. Her toes curled inwards as the chilly flooring nipped at her soles. Rising, she felt her way through the darkness. Across the room, she found a vanity dresser with an array of socks, underpants, and shirts. Though the undergarments were much too big for her frame, she slid them over her nudity as well as a clean shirt. From there, the socks came naturally to warm her chilled feet. Still, she couldn’t find a light switch. She paced around the room once more till her hands found the bedroom door, then the doorknob, and out into the hallway she was.

The apartment was woefully silent except for her breaths and her feet quietly rapping on the floor. The hallway was desolate except for the occasional houseplant, or vase standing guard. Abigail was careful to not disturb the décor on either side of the hallway though and as she passed, the vase nearest to her wobbled. She of course braced it back against the wall. The apartment's windows were dark, if not darker than the ones in the bedroom. Not a ray of light pierced through the darkness. She couldn't begin to understand why Will would want to have an apartment so dark.

She peeked her head around the corner to find the living room. The living room was of a modest size though lacked in decoration, saved for the couches, and television set. A computer was tucked away into a corner. Not a single light was on, but the faint glow of the television nearby illuminated a small section of the room. She couldn't see Will entirely though she figured he must be somewhere in the room.

To her left, the kitchen was of an open concept. Entering the kitchen, Abigail looked up into the cabinets to only find dinnerware rather than perishables. There was neither a can, nor box, not even a jar of condiments within the barren cabinets. Disappointed, Abigail closed the cabinets.

She was parched as the gash on her throat reminded her of her thirst. As a curse to her uneventful attempt to sleep, she'd grown unbelievably thirsty. Abigail gravitated towards the refrigerator and upon opening the door, she was stunned to find it filled not with food, but clear pouches of *red* poultices. Not a plate, or gallon of milk, not even a fruit was within the drawers of the fridge except for the red bags.

Curiosity drove her to reach for a plastic pouch and upon examining it further, she realized it was a bag of blood. There was no mistaking it as the pouch had been labeled 'o-negative'. The rest of the bags had their own distinctive labeling and Abigail felt her stomach swim. The longer she stared at the packaged blood did her guts gurgle nosily. Her mouth watered and there was a tingling sensation to her gums. Abigail opened her mouth and felt the front of her teeth. Upon disengaging her fingers from her mouth, she noticed her saliva was tinted rouge. She grimaced and closed the fridge's door.

"My teeth aren't loose…", she commented although it was only herself in the kitchen. "Why are my teeth bleeding?"

She wiped her fingers upon her shirt. The refrigerator possessed her to open it again, but to her better judgement, she stayed clear. As thirsty as she was, drinking *blood* was the last thing she'd do. The sheer thought made her queasy. Queasy enough to stir disgust in her gut.

Vomit had begun to froth up from her throat and she attempted to cover her mouth with her hand. However, the flood gates were open, and Abigail's disgust expunged from her lips. She wretched into the kitchen sink. What remained in her stomach dribbled from her mouth in a heated fury. She recovered from her heaving to look at the bile swirling down the drain. Her bodily essence was tinted the same rouge her salvia had been and Abigail caught herself heaving once more. It wasn't until she felt herself go hoarse did the vomiting cease. Surely if Will was in the living room, or elsewhere, he would've heard her robust retching.

Yet, Will hadn't entered the kitchen.

Abigail wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Her gut pranged with a painful stab. Her shirt was stained with what dribbled down her chin and chest.

Blood. Abigail hated blood especially after imagining she was drowning in it hours before. *I can't get enough of it*.

Taken aback, she pressed her back against the kitchen counter. Her stomach felt sore as she recollected her composure. Abigail had enough of blood. Whether it was from a cut or a fresh kill, the sight of it made her melt. It was sickly reminiscent to the many times her father would stock their refrigerator with the meat from their kills. Her father never saved the blood. For whatever reason, her father abhorred blood as much as she did. Abigail was unaware if there was a deeper reason to why she shared a disdain of blood along with her father, but lest that be the only similarity she had with him.

Upon further theorizing why the blood was in the fridge, she'd never known for people to keep bags of blood in their fridges, let alone have a kitchen void of food, and it was a mystery. Will was a mystery himself, as well as his creepily dark apartment, and the events of the previous night. She'd question him later, perhaps when she was more coherent, and able to defend herself in case her savior intended on ripping the rest of her to shreds. She didn't necessarily feel that kind of hunch from Will, but then again, she hardly knew the man.

Abigail frowned and turned to reach into the upper cabinets for a cup.

Quietly, she ran the kitchen faucet to fill her cup with water. Drinking the water cooled the burn in her throat. She filled the glass twice after the initial cup till her stomach ached. With her thirst momentarily quenched, Abigail continued sneaking around the apartment. She was careful not to step too heavily, as she doubted she wasn't necessarily allowed to wander, but at the same time, Will hadn't prohibited her elsewise. On the other hand, he hadn't told her to leave. Then again, Abigail didn't have anywhere else to be, especially now with monsters roaming the streets.

Will is a monster. Abigail cautiously became still as water as she turned her head to peer into the living room. *Or at least he said he was*.

Rightfully, Abigail would need to keep her distance from Will as he was a self-proclaimed monster. Yet, something allured her to Will, whether it was because he saved her, or some other force. He was magnetic whatever the reason was.

She snuck into the living room to be alarmed by not only just Will fast asleep on the couch, but another individual tuckered out in a lounge chair. She caught her surprised gasp in the palm of her hand as she looked over the slumbering duo. Will was buried underneath a blanket, but she could make out the outline of his sprouting curls. The other person, a much older, ragged looking man slept upright with his face resting upon his hand. He seemed to be at peace, just like Will sleeping on the couch, and Abigail swallowed.

The clock nearby was well past seven in the morning, but neither Will nor the man in the lounge chair had stirred.

Dead asleep. Abigail thought as she approached Will. The other man shared the same stillness Will had.

His chest didn't rise and fall with his breath or did breath escape from his nostrils. He didn't even snore. The man nearby was the same way. Abigail gently pulled the cover off Will and again, he didn't stir nor did his eyes flutter awake.

Shakily, she reached her hand out to touch his hand, but she retracted her grasp once she felt how cold his hand was. She quickly brought the cover back over him.

He's even colder than me. Abigail traced back her steps as she made distance between herself, Will, and the man asleep in the lounge chair.

Not risking waking either Will or his guest up, Abigail tiptoed out the living room. Even in darkness, she felt herself growing anxious as she couldn't decipher what was shadow, versus what was reality. A ringing in her ears pained her and her teeth began to chatter. She made it into the hallway and another whisk of coldness swept over her. She shuddered and braced herself against the wall. The tips of toes throbbed with static lightning as she was immobilized on the wall.

The piercing echo in her ears continued the longer she remained in the darkened hallway. It was like the hellish shrill of a deer whistle only amplified tenfold into her ear canal. The hallway elongated and blurred ahead of her. She attempted to sulk back into the bedroom as the sound became unrelentless.

The ringing ceased as Abigail pushed the door open to the bedroom. The bed was still the same, as well as the room, and no visages of blood leaking from the floorboards or walls. Again, using the wall as her guide, she managed to feel around until her fingers tapped around the light switch. She flicked the switch and the room was flooded with yellow light. Her eyes stung at the sudden shift, but it was a welcome relief seeing her surroundings.

Baltimore remained relatively the same; hazy, people walking here and there, and an overwhelming sense of despair in the air. The street was void of traffic except for the occasional passerby. There were a few cop cars stationed with their sirens muted on the other side of the street. Upon closer examination, they were particularly keen on the far-off alleyway Abigail remembered from last night. Crime scene tape stretched out and wrapped around the nearby light poles. Abigail knew they were investigating *her*. They wouldn't catch her or her attacker and that was a term she had to swallow like a hard, flaming coal. The slash on her neck throbbed and she rolled her head from side to side.

"*Blood, blood, blood*.", an unknown, condescending voice of some sort mocked. "*Your blood! There! On the asphalt, dead bird!*"

She was spooked by the suddenness of the voice. She spun around to find she was alone in the bedroom. Said origin of the voice was nonexistent as she scanned every inch and every shadow. Abigail prickled with gooseflesh as the voice had tickled the shell of her ear. The curve of her ear itched. She gingerly tapped the back of her ear.

I'm losing my mind.

Abigail looked back down in awe. Other than the detectives canvassing their would-be crime scene, life down below appeared normal. A woman jogged with her dog faithfully leashed at her side, kids walked together, and the occasional vendor sold hot food. She was once one of those people haplessly going about their days without a care in the world. She held resentment though it was misplaced as the strangers down below weren't the source of her misanthropy, or her trauma, rather, they were unaware of the monsters that lurked after sundown. Abigail turned away from the window and crossed her arms. She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth.

Oh, to be oblivious. Abigail felt the raw skin of her lip between her teeth.

She could return to her hotel at least to gather the rest of her belongings and head home. Baltimore was enough for her and her parents must've been in turmoil upon discovering her lack of presence. As much as she wanted to get away from her ordinary home, with her ordinary parents, Baltimore proved more than enough a venture she should've never embarked.

She was no more obligated to stay in Will's apartment than she was to return home, though the latter was her ultimate decision, and she walked out the bedroom again. She turned into the bathroom and upon opening the door, she found her coat folded onto the countertop. Her shredded clothes were haphazardly strewn about though she couldn't mend the fabric even if she was a master seamstress.

Blood had been left to dry upon the sleeves and breast of her jacket, but not all too noticeable as the dark fabric obfuscated much of the gore. Abigail buttoned up her jacket and from there, she looked down to see her sneakers had been recovered. Though they were covered in mud, torn at the tips, and now stained forever with her blood, they were the only shoes she had. Digging her hands into her coat pocket, she felt the outline of hotel room key. A blessing, really, as she needed to leave Baltimore as quick as she could. She slipped her feet inside her shoes and softly crept back into the hallway. She felt tense sneaking about like a prohibited phantom. With every creak on the floor, she felt her bated breath escape past her lips.

She snuck back into the living room and loomed over the couch. Will had moved; he was rolled onto his side with his arms tightly pressed against his chest. His expression was of muted terror. His bottom lip faltered and the tightness around his eyes made them crinkle. He would twitch, almost like a death rattle, and it became more frequent as Will's presumed nightmare continued. Abigail watched morosely though she did not know why she felt such despair upon looking at Will in the throes of a night terror. It reminded her of herself; the nightmares she would flee from but only to die in them. She crouched down to place her hand upon Will and his coldness tinged with her warmness left her hand paralyzed.

"*Don't wake it*.", a small, haunting voice whispered. "*Let it sleep*."

"*Rest here, dead bird*."

Abigail couldn't explain it, but the voice that whispered into her ears compelled her to sit down and linger at Will's side. The tips of her ears warmed, and her chest felt alleviated from

the trepidation she had for returning home. She stroked the back of his hand with her thumb. His skin felt like plastic; seemingly unreal in how cold it was.

She didn't want to leave anymore. Without a reason, or a criticism, Abigail found herself settled and at ease the more she hovered in Will's presence. Her mind didn't think otherwise. She gauged Will's stillness the longer she stared at him before resting her head onto his chest.

Not even a heartbeat. She took note of Will's unearthly stillness, but wasn't entirely alarmed, as her own heartbeat sufficed the silence between them.

She laxed. The sleep that once evaded her coaxed her into a dreamy abode. The morning sun had tucked itself away from view as if it understood her resolve for sleep. Abigail wouldn't resist as in this singular moment; she was at peace with herself. The trauma from the previous night, her parents' fear on her whereabouts, and what her future held dissipated the longer she rested her head on Will's chest.

You're a strange one, Mr. Graham. Abigail watched Will with an intensity that would've made clouds weep. Her stare lessened as sleep made her eyelids heavy.

She closed her eyes to the rhythm of her heartbeat thumping softly against her chest.

Bedelia was awake, far earlier than what she would've liked, but she was awake with her mind focused on one premise: Hannibal. She turned over and looked at Hannibal. He was at rest as his nocturnal biology stilled his body, but there was a seemingly omnipotent aspect to his slumber as Bedelia noticed on many occasions he was always aware. However, he was very much asleep as he hadn't stirred upon Bedelia waking up. She scouted the fine wrinkles laxed around his eyes, the way his lips kept their distinctive pout, and how tranquil he appeared to be. His blood-stained tears had stained his face red, but they were long dried and never to be witnessed again, that, Bedelia was sure of.

Yet, a constrictive tightness held her chest hostage the longer she stared at her beloved Prince. She couldn't bear seeing Hannibal in the throes of despair, let alone could she stomach that it was his dreadful obsession with the *fledgling* that had triggered such a response. She had warned Hannibal the stakes of his obsession with Will Graham and he chastised her. Bedelia scoffed under her breath as she steadied her gaze over on her slumbering lover.

Of all the years they've known each other, she hadn't betrayed his judgement, but it was just this once that Hannibal disregarded her council. Rather, he played with her intelligence and instituted that it was *she* who was obsessed. The last person Bedelia would be obsessed with wouldn't be in the *infamous* Will Graham.

Bedelia was not a medium or could she cite unnatural forces at work, but she could read men and what they desired. Hannibal was no different, though he believed he kept his desires sheltered away, but last night revealed he was still capable of cultivating desire. Dreadfully, Bedelia showed her belly as to argue with Hannibal was a losing battle of wits. He could wear her down till the surrender, but not the other way around.

She kept her distance though it pained her elsewise. Like the maddened fool in love Bedelia was, she pursued Hannibal in both of her thoughts and actions. Foolish of her, really, but Bedelia was madly in love with Hannibal. He could scold her, ignore her, even trod upon her, but Bedelia would love him the same. He strung her this way as when she was without Hannibal, she was without a clear purpose.

Fragile of her as she especially abhorred relying on a man.

He knew of her boldness and resilience, then manipulated her into believing he was different. No man was different, human or not, and Bedelia tricked herself otherwise because of Hannibal.

Bedelia caught how Hannibal's brow seemed to strain as if he was knowingly reading her contemplations as she laid beside him. His brows subsided back into their lax state and Bedelia averted her gaze to the vaulted ceiling.

She couldn't bare being apart from Hannibal. It was until last night she decided to make amends with Hannibal, though Bedelia knew she wasn't in the wrong, but for her own sanity, she wanted to appease Hannibal so that their relationship could survive.

The ambiance was perfect; the lights turned low, an air of mystery in the air, and of course, her unexpected presence. Naturally, she didn't believe she could sneak upon a vampire. Hannibal had a seemingly keen sense of hearing. She'd lathered herself in her favorite oils, those particular to what Hannibal favored, and donned her pearls. She lied in wait as the clock turned into the haunting hours.

In a thousand years she'd never expect to catch Hannibal at his lowest. Or did she want to believe Hannibal, as proud and graceful as he was, could harbor wailing despair. She was beyond paralyzed as Hannibal approached her with bloodied tears running from his eyes. Even as he laid mourning in her arms, Bedelia couldn't accept that her Prince, *the* Prince of Baltimore, cried. She was well-learned of his often-morose moods or bouts with boredom, but never, not ever, would the socialite thought she'd be jury to Hannibal's unraveling.

Bedelia pressed her lips together. The source of their misfortune was from Will Graham, but Bedelia had no means to dispose of him.

Their first introduction taught her thus much; he was acutely aware his position between himself and Bedelia. He was a vampire and she a human. He would naturally outlive her as the maggots would render the flesh from her bones in the dirt. Bedelia was well-versed in the supernatural and knew by ordinary means, Will couldn't be harmed by the likes of guns and knives.

And yet, Will Graham had no friends in powerful positions, or a name for himself. He had not a business venture, a disgruntled spouse, or a significant claim in Baltimore that Bedelia could exploit. She was beautiful, cutthroat in the world of politics, and in better favors with Hannibal. Her influence reached far and swallowed Will's shadow tenfold. In fact, Will Graham had not a single advantage over Bedelia.

Except that Hannibal, her lover, and their Prince, was *smitten* by the tragedy of a wayward fledgling.

She'd liked to believe that she felt no less threatened over Will than she would her political rivals. Yet, Will Graham, in the shortest of words, prosed Hannibal as if he was a gregarious politician. What Hannibal saw in the wreck of a fledgling, Bedelia didn't see it, but she knew that his rising favor with her lover meant the end of her.

He was going to snatch what little in life Bedelia still adored. Hannibal, with all his years of immortality, had been the best thing that ever happened to Bedelia. Her mortal years were but a blink in his eye yet to her, she only just started living. The marriages-turned-divorces, the strife-filled sphere of politics she inhabited, and even her own waning mortality was nothing compared to being in favor with the Prince.

In fact, if it wasn't for Hannibal, she had thought of ending her existence.

He learned of her excellence and comforted her defeats, unlike any human, and nothing in the context Will Graham could have. The fledgling couldn't begin to understand the sacred matrimony she and Hannibal had forged. Though they weren't married in the mortal terms of husband and wife, they treated each other as that; husband and wife. He was the sun of her world, and she, the moon to his night. He'd wait for her on hand and knee for a hundred years if it meant a night with her. And for the many years she was blessed to bask in his presence, she wouldn't trade it for anything.

Not even her life.

Bedelia wasn't certain that Hannibal would grow bored with the fledgling, now that she had been audience to his confession, and she had to prepare herself for the worse. Like the divorces, miscarriages, and stillbirths, Bedelia had a high expectation for the end. Bedelia soured at that notion that Hannibal had found companionship not in her, but in Will Graham, because both vampires shared a lonely existence that came with being a vampire.

Nor did Hannibal propose Bedelia to join in his immortality. Loneliness would be a figment of the imagination for them. Hannibal would have no need for Will Graham as Bedelia, just as she performed as a mortal, would be by Hannibal's side forevermore. They would theorize the unknown, make love upon the gaze of the moon, and enjoy their company, much like they did now. The sun would be but a memory. Will would be a passing interest and eventually a grain of sand in the hourglass. Then, Hannibal would be hers forever, as from what she understood, a bond between a sire and his childe was the strongest force in the world of darkness.

Yet, here she was, beginning to feel like the odd one in the equation.

Promises of immortality aside, Bedelia was led to believe that her position was forever set in stone by Hannibal. He promised her once already that he'd never abandon her, or dream about it, but Bedelia wasn't so certain now.

Would you yell at me? Bedelia remembered how Hannibal teased her upon her previous concern over his infatuation with the fledgling. *Would you try to kill me?*

Bedelia didn't want to picture herself enacting violence upon Hannibal. Bedelia didn't believe she could raise her hand to strike him no matter how much he offended her. She would much rather prefer him killing her than the latter. However, thoughts of stringing Will up like the lying, crazed strumpet he was and bludgeoning him to death was much easier to fantasize. Bedelia shielded a snicker forming at her lips with her finger. She looked over to Hannibal to see him still blissfully asleep. She softened.

I couldn't kill you. She reached over to tuck a silvery strand back behind his ears. The Prince did not stir or did he awaken upon her kind gesture. *You mean everything to me, Hannibal*.

Momentarily calmed, Bedelia rose gracefully to redress herself. As their night was absent of their usual carnal rendezvous, Bedelia had not a reason to stay longer, or watch the Prince at rest. He was safe here; the tower had excellent security.

Tiptoeing around the expansive bedroom, Bedelia found her dress and heels. She redressed and tamed her wild locks back into a ponytail. She would shower and redress upon returning home as her day was to start as she was not a Prince, and her matters must be attended without diplomats.

Upon entering the living room, she took great care in inspecting the space. There weren't any significant changes in the décor or ambiance and that assured Bedelia that Will's claws hadn't settled too firmly into Hannibal yet. In fact, the penthouse was still the familiarly dark abode she'd grown to appreciate. She ran her fingers along the chiseled columns encasing the living room. Her heels clicked nosily across the marbled floor and her favorite perfume, though Hannibal found it obnoxious at times, masked every inch of the living room. The very same walls that were witnesses to their conversations, or their passion, sometimes the secrets her and Hannibal shared emboldened her.

Will Graham couldn't expect to replace Bedelia as every wall, painting, and countertop within the penthouse had her as a memento. Regardless if they were to peel the paint from the walls, crack the tiled floor, or destroy the sanctity of the penthouse, her presence was immortalized here. Hannibal could replace her physical self, but not the time she was here, or the aroma of perfume from the air. She smirked and swayed as she walked towards the kitchen. Of all the vices Hannibal was subjecting her to with his growing affection for the fledgling, she was proud knowing that her enduring presence was forever etched into the walls of his *elysium*.

Before she was to leave, she craved the delicious ambrosia that was Hannibal's imported coffee. Though Hannibal did not thirst or hunger, he dutifully kept his kitchen well-stocked on a basis since Bedelia's stays often required her to sate her physical needs. She journeyed through his cabinets to find the untouched, renowned reserves of his imported Indonesian blend. Hannibal was a creature of habit as he kept much of his old-world routines; particularly, how he prepared coffee. He made her coffee often although she preferred her caffeine in her waking hours. Nevertheless, Hannibal diligently made her the crafted beverage upon request, or sometimes out on a whim, or even if he sensed she was tired from the day's work.

She smiled as she held the coffee within her hands. *Her* Hannibal knew of her needs even if it's as miniscule as a cup of coffee. She sat the coffee container down upon the counter.

Bedelia bent down to retrieve his original, perhaps one of the first ever French press from the cabinet. Upon setting the sophisticated device onto the counter, Bedelia was alarmed to a *thump* sounding off from across the kitchen. She eyed towards the pantry on the far side of the kitchen though the few times she walked inside, Hannibal had not a cured meat or stored vintage within. Again, her visits were of an off-and-on basis and it would've been wasteful to keep a fully stocked pantry if Hannibal wasn't meant to eat the food inside. Warily, Bedelia came from around the island counter and towards the pantry.

She didn't know what to expect, but she hoped it was a stray can of some sort that somehow fell off the shelf. She carefully wrapped her hands around the handles and pulled gently. Inside, she was surprised as the sight was to behold. Rather than a pantry with shelves filled with foodstuffs, inside was a widened space void of any shelves, and the prison to a hapless soul.

A man, immaculately perfected with a prime physique, was suspended by heavy bondage inside. He was bewildered, as Bedelia expected, upon being tied up, stripped nude, and bleeding onto the floor underneath him. The smell of blood made her nostrils flare as she shielded her nose with her finger. She held her breath as the captive man fumbled gagged words at her.

Of all the things she expected to be within Hannibal's kitchen, this didn't faze her as much. Severed fingers, jars of eyeballs, or a decapitated head would've spooked her, but the hanging prisoner was rather novice of Hannibal. She raised her eyebrows as the man dangled there helplessly. Hannibal could be rather devious in the hobbies he pursued, but this wasn't something that would've frightened Bedelia. Often enough, Hannibal took great pleasure in disposing his enemies personally.

She theorized that the suspended man in some form offended Hannibal and her often cruel lover tortured him so. The room was absent of the usual torture tools: whips, bludgeons, and knives.

She tiptoed carefully around the puddles of blood. As she approached, her lover's captive babbled profusely although his pleas were muffled by the gag in his mouth. Bedelia studied him. She scanned the extent of the bonding around the captive man; silver as the flesh burning underneath was meant for vampires. The burning etches in the flesh became deeper more the captive struggled which immensely pained him; his eyes were telling of his distress.

"My, my.", Bedelia tutted. "What should we do with you?"

The suspended captive throttled his head from side to side, but only worsened his condition further. Bedelia made a gentle, calming noise from between her lips as she stilled the prisoner thrashing about. She was careful not to make direct eye contact as many vampires, Hannibal included, knew the power of manipulation. The vampire was deathly cold to the touch reminiscent of Hannibal's, but the blood dribbling from his wounds felt oddly warm. She sighed as she caressed the captive's head near her.

"Hannibal is my lover.", Bedelia admitted, stroking her fingertips over the vampire's skin. Her fingers trailed blood back and forth. "But I can't stand him."

The dangling vampire said nothing behind his gag, but dullishly stared at Bedelia, as if he was already bored of the conversation. She ignored him.

“Have you ever been in love?”, her fingers started to become slickened with the blood trailing between them. “Truly?”

The captive said nothing but averted his eyes away.

“I don’t know what I should do.”, Bedelia continued. “Whether I should leave or fight for my place.”

She didn’t want to be alone, not ever again, not that Hannibal had shown her life was merely more than just breathing. Life was meant to be constructed for their own means and not shackled by doubts and fears. Bedelia wished dearly she could apply the same apathy she felt towards her fellow humankind towards Will, but she couldn’t, as Will threatened to take away everything she’d ever known; love.

“It’s not your fault, of course, but…”, her thoughts began to trail as her own eyes welled with tears. “Oh, nevermind…”

She callously let the prisoner’s head drop back down. He shook a bit as Bedelia wiped her fingers down her dress. It was a hapless attempt at confession. She was a woman without religion, or a sound theology, but damned she’d be verbally flogging herself to a strung-up pauper. The tears that had bubbled at the corner of her eyes dissipated as she turned around to walk out the pantry. As quick as they were to form, their existence ceased as she shrouded herself in her comfortable apathy.

She closed the pantry doors rather loudly, but without a care as Hannibal would remain asleep until the sun set. Abandoning her fixation for coffee, Bedelia went back to the living room to grab her purse and coat hanging where she left it on the elongated coat rack. From the corner of her eye, she caught the haunting presence of Jack watching her from the hallway. She paused and met his stare.

“Jack.”, she greeted flatly. “I’m leaving.”

The hired guard said nothing but dissipated back into the adobe of shadows he came from. He had a tendency of being mute. Hannibal never once uttered where he found the likes of Jack or how he came into his employment, but she knew he was indeed a haunting shadow.

Excellent security.

She opened her purse to find her car keys. Bedelia rolled her eyes and let herself out the penthouse.

The elevator descended into the parking structure. She avoided the lobby as many times the mumbling, scattered-brain security guard posted there eyed her too dangerously for her comfort. There, her car, along with Hannibal’s prized Bentley was parked mere spaces from each other. The vast emptiness of the parking structure spooked her, but nothing would dare

to harm her if she were within Hannibal's *elysium*. Unlocking her car and sitting inside did she exhale.

Soon, her exhale became a strained breath, followed by laughter, and ended with a defeated scream. She slammed her hand repetitively against the steering wheel and her tears ran down her face freely. Her hands throbbed and flushed to light pink. Bedelia was not to be scorned and hell had no fury for a scorned woman. She glanced into the rear-view mirror as the sun passing overhead lit the parking structure in a warm glow.

He's my lover. Bedelia reassured herself as she started the car. The engine purred to life and she felt the warmness emitting from it near her feet. *He'll always be my lover*.

She reversed and turned herself about to face towards the exit. The street was empty except for the occasional passerby. She idled as she waited for upcoming traffic to clear. Her hands felt clammy against the steering wheel and a familiar, gut-wrenching knife jabbed her stomach. She paused to catch her breath as traffic began to lighten.

Bedelia pulled out of the parking structure and onto the street. Her legs felt like iron was embedded within them and it was taking her outmost ounces of willpower not to crash. She needed to get home, recuperate once more, and get Will Graham *out* of her life.

And nothing will ever tear us apart.

His legs were cold. The stream passing through his legs chilled his bones and left them to stagnantly stand guard in the current. The air was crisp and refreshed from a night's rain. The forest around him was at ease, although not forever, but in the early morning hours, there was peace amongst the sticks and leaves. The sky above was hazy. Forest creatures scurried through the overgrowth as the promise of rain meant fresh vegetation sprouting from the decay. Birds flew and sung their songs overhead.

Will looked down at his watered reflection in contemplation. Here, he was lively with his cheeks still plump of life, skin void of darkened blue veins, and eyes without the tinges of gold outlining them. His hair was tucked behind his ears and tamed underneath his familiar fishing cap. His weight was of a healthy bounty.

He hardly recognized himself.

In his hand, a fishing pole attached with a line was curled around his wrist. In his other hand was of his catch; a hearty pike dangling helplessly from the hook stuck in its mouth. The sun was shining just above the tree line and Will felt its familiar warmth on his skin. He looked towards his catch and frowned. The pike was gasping for air as it choked upon the end of the hook. Beady eyes pleaded with him and Will felt a prang of remorse.

You're suffering. Will watched the pike struggle fruitlessly against the cruel hook stuck underneath it's mouth.

Tucking his fishing pole underneath his arm, he freed the pike struggling to escape its capture. Will threw it back only to watch it swim away frantically, perhaps terrified, or letting

baser instincts will it to survive. The hook in his hand tinged with blood stirred his hunger. He tucked the ruined hook into his pocket.

He equipped the fishing pole to examine the delicately crafted, yet laborious tool of imprisonment. It was his favorite, if memory could be trusted, and Will was comforted by the tool. His father had a similar one in the days he taught Will to fly-fish. Naturally, he was inexperienced as many times he ended up with hooks slicing past his ears or embedded elsewhere but the water. However, he couldn't picture himself in this very moment or could he associate with his father's various fishing tutorials. He hadn't been fishing since his dog days. Yet, he backed up and casted the fishing line out into the deeper section of the river.

The line bobbed up on the water's surface as Will kept a steady, but liberal grip on the pole. His feet found sound footing to prevent him from sliding if the inevitable fish, or river creature decided to put up a fight. The wind blowing in from behind chilled him, but it was a much-welcomed coldness compared to what he was used to.

This is a dream. Will couldn't help but glance towards the tree line as he waited for a bite. *Or am I dead?*

There, he could make out the shapes of deer, but only for them to dissipate in the thickening overgrowth. The sun up ahead was all but a memory as Will had to come to terms that his life was without its warmth. Yet, he was feeling the warmth, the water squelching in his boots, and the familiar tug of the casted line ahead of him. Had he been dead, finally dead, then hell wasn't as bad as the pastor made it out to be at Sunday service.

He allowed the line to tug a bit more, not too excited to pull the pole as the catch would be lost, but when he felt another consistent tug he began to slowly reel in his catch.

A much harder tug made Will tense and bend his knees. As he tried to pull the line without too much force, the catch on the other end became difficult. He attempted to reel back as much as he could, but inevitably, he was pulled forward. Water crashed up into his face as he stumbled towards the waterbed. He kept his hands on the pole however the catch was dragging him into deeper waters. Never had he experienced such a catch, but he'd be damned to let it go. He grimaced and kept up the battle of willpower just as the line pulled, then relaxed. Will was taken aback and he landed fully into the water. He struggled to get back onto his feet and his fishing pole was lost to the river.

However, he couldn't be any more prepared for what he witnessed ascending from the water. The air shifted from crisp coolness into hot, heavy miasma and the trees surrounding him on either side became twisted, brittle columns. Songbirds transformed into howling harpies blaring their screams all around. The water was warmer and took on a red tint. Will tried to waddle out from the stream just as the water became heavier, sludge-like, and reminiscent to blood.

This is a nightmare. Will crawled up the pebbled shoreline just as the quaint forest was of a devious, nightmarish design with the sun blurred into a red moon. The pebbles underneath him glowed in the same red hue.

The river parted to reveal the red-scorched stones of the river and the floating, decaying corpses of the river's fish. From above the water's edge, the familiar, blood-drenched figure that plagued his previous nightmare basked in Will's horror. Behind him, an equally troublesome, menacingly shadowed figure with two large horns appeared out of the reddened river. A pair of sanguine eyes filled with a hunger the fledgling couldn't describe left him wallowing in terror.

Will couldn't get his legs to cooperate as he fumbled, sputtering water-turned blood from out his mouth, and frantically trying to make distance from the imagery happening behind him.

It was without success because as he crawled, he was seemingly pulled back closer towards the water's edge. Will began to cry as the hovering figure of the bloodied pariah came closer alongside his blackened companion. He looked over his shoulder and felt the life in him drain back into the familiar encumbering status of death. The bloodied figure was smiling, or at least, jubilant at Will's terror. His monstrous companion, however, was not smiling but a frown stretched across its face.

"*Kindred*.", the man uttered hollowly. "Oh, how I've watched you so…"

Will felt his skin come alive with a thousand spiders crawling underneath. The panic swelling in his chest exhaled in quickened breaths couldn't be contained. His vision doubled and his muscles constricted little autonomy he had left. The shadowy figure joining the bloodied man turned its head away, almost morosely, as if it couldn't stand Will terrified. Will was hyperventilating by the time the bloodied figure was ashore.

"You best be careful, my fated childe.", said the bloodied man. "As these are the *last* nights for all of us."

Last nights. Will's head dangled between the space of his arms as he couldn't composed himself. *What does that have to do with me?*

"A terrible series of events, I must say…", the bloodied man pointed up towards the blotched sun. "…*kindred* blood, *kine* blood…it will all flow."

The fledging caught his breath amid trying to decipher what he was being warned, but his eyes couldn't pry away from the horned figure. The physique was of a man, but the legs were reminiscent to a deer. The horns proudly crowned upon his head stretched infinitely, almost as if they were made from shadow, and his presence was foreboding. Yet, it was the face that drew Will's attention the most.

The chiseled jaw, high cheekbones, and sharpened eyes were all too familiar though Will couldn't place the similarities. Skin slickly cool with a sheen of moisture gleamed against the bright contrast. In a way, the shadowy man was beautiful if not majestic to behold. He looked back to the bloodied man seemingly waiting for Will's attention averted back to him.

"What am I to do?", Will asked. "I am but lost and abandoned."

The bloodied man shook his head and momentarily, he smiled.

“You are never alone, child of Malkav.”, the man reassured the fledging below him. “As *kindred* are numerous and your path is aligned with friends and enemies alike.”

His eyes shifted to the horned figure beginning to wade back into the bloody river. He looked back at Will and from the frown came a grin, then a widened smirk. Will glanced between the two and swallowed. He needed not a monster or his nightmares as guides for his immortal existence.

“To guide you along the *true* path…”, the bloodied man trailed off with his physicality beginning to drool into the all-too-familiar puddle of blood Will witnessed his sire coagulate into.

“She is a leviathan, waiting your arrival, where the sea swallows from the east.”

Will watched as the bloodied man transformed into the same reddened sludge the river had turned into. It slowly began to retract until it vanished under the water’s edge. The horned man gave Will one lasting, mournful gaze before it too joined his bloodied companion into the bloodied river. The fledgling squeezed his eyes shut to force himself to wake up.

Let it end. Will chanted to himself as he dug his nails into his palms. *Let this nightmare end*.

Darkness enveloped his surroundings as the ceiling above him was a comforting familiarity. Will blinked slowly to recollect his vision. He was not alone, not anymore, as he felt a presence resting across his chest. Averting his eyes downwards, he caught the outline of Abigail, his *ghoul*, resting silently upon him. He had thought she’d be far gone by now, but he was gladdened by the fact she stayed. Slowly, he reached a hand over to caress the curtains of her obscuring her sleeping face. She stirred but did not wake.

From the corner of his eye, he could make out Brian fast asleep in the lounge chair. Will was relieved that the Anarch had came home and there was much he’d have to explain to him as Abigail, though it was not Will’s decision to allow her to die, was a complication. For what rules were in place for their vampiric lifestyle, fathering ghouls didn’t necessarily sound legal. Far as he knew, he was harboring an alien.

Will grimaced and looked back down to Abigail.

She was lively and youthful compared to Will’s worsening decay. Though he was several years her senior, he was reminded of himself when he curled his fingers through her darkened locks. He didn’t want a fate as tragic as his for Abigail. Like her, he was an innocent caught in the maw of monsters. His life would never be the same and likewise for Abigail. A twisted sort of fate for the both. He’d been damned if he allowed anyone, especially the Prince, to take Abigail away from him. Brian wouldn’t hurt her, that he was certain of, and Abigail wouldn’t be a problem. She seemed to be more afraid of Will than anything else.

Yet, they had each other. Unlike himself, Abigail had him to guide her through the night. Will was no expert on his own immortality, but he’d hoped by teaching Abigail that he’d learn how to find himself. Brian would help along the way, as he always did, and what’d he

promised to do forevermore. The Brujah kept his promise as of late as Will maneuvered his eyes over to the slumbering Anarch.

He's my friend. Will looked back towards Abigail and caught a silvery stream of her saliva trailing from her lips.

He wanted to get up.

Will sighed and averted his eyes back up to the ceiling. He was neither tired or rested. Another curse of immortality as sleep seemed to be a limbo he couldn't escape or conquer.

It wasn't night out yet. The apartment kept a darkened tint but traces of orange flooded through. His body didn't want to rise off the couch, reasonably, as he was confined to being at rest till the moon was up high. Not risking waking either Abigail or Brian, Will remained still with his fleeting thoughts. His mind was absent of the idled whispers that'd typically chatter to him.

He relayed his cryptic nightmares over in his head: the gilded box, the "last" nights, and now a leviathan at sea. He began to compare the gilded box towards the *Elizabeth Dane*, the cursed ship still at port, and his stomach dropped. The nightly broadcasts of the week spoke of the *Elizabeth Dane* as if it was an old-world artifact, something to be revered, but Will knew better than to believe such a fallacy.

It left him uneasy as well as Brian, and everyone else it seemed. Will didn't know what the association existed between the *Elizabeth Dane* and the rumored sarcophagus boarded inside, but the theories gnawed at him. Surely, the Prince knew of the vessel and Will imagined that he was going to be tasked in boarding the ship, or at least that was what his nightmares referenced. He thought of latter and hoped Hannibal wouldn't conscript him in going anywhere near the leviathan.

Nearby, the computer made a familiar 'ping' and Will mentally groaned. His wishful thinking ended up backfiring. Hannibal was summoning him again.

Carefully, he tucked his legs closer to him to make sure he wasn't to wake Abigail. She laxed towards the groove Will left in the couch as the fledgling stood up. Brian didn't wake as Will tiptoed past him. He quietly paced towards the computer. He was mindful to quiet his fingers across the keyboard as the email icon blinked at the top of the screen. He opened the email and rightfully so, it was Hannibal asking for his presence *once* again.

So much for a good night's sleep.

Will crept back towards the bedroom to change his clothes. He learned that it was best not to keep the Prince waiting once he called. He would have to skip the shower although he doubted if the shower would wash away the deathly musk attached to him. He caught himself in the reflection of the vanity mirror.

He was dead. His skin was paler and there was a distinctive gauntness to his features. He looked away in cynicism. His nightmare had him believing that for once, just once, he was

alive again and enjoying an early morning catch. Yet, here he was, suffocating in the deluge that was Baltimore as an undead, not-so-tightly-screwed vampire.

As where all kindred must go. Will sighed and began to change his clothes. *What a load of shit…*

Chapter End Notes

I was supposed to have posted this last week but my document got corrupted in Word so I had to scramble to rewrite the little I did have. I learned the hard way I should just keep this hard-saved on a flash drive or something. Apologizing again for small errors or formatting weirdness. Anyways besides that, the rough timeline game wise is starting at the beginnings of Elizabethan Rendezvous mission.

I'm very much implying that Abigail (as Will's ghoul) picked up aspects of his Malkavanism (scattered voices) just as Heather in the actually game does if you have a Malkavian protagonist. To what extent I'll showcase, I'll never tell. Very much later I plan to incorporate Hannibal's wendigo* aspect just as I did towards the end here.
*I don't know the right term right now.

Another side note: I hate to mention this but sorry if the Kindred survey asks alot. I tend to use 100% of the feedback received as a guide in judging where I should be at story-wise. So please (if you can), just answer honestly on the survey I literally won't be mad about it. You can take it as many times as you like. Survey linked at the very end of the work end notes.

See you next update.

Sycophant

Chapter Summary

> Will asks Brian to keep a promise while he gets himself entangled with an untrustworthy stranger. The Anarch and Prince share stern words.

Chapter Notes

> Content warning for explicit language. Proof-read much to my ability so apologies in advance for any wording mistakes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XXV

"Sycophant"

Will paced the apartment deftly as he fastened the buttons of his collared shirt. His belt came next as it constricted his pants tighter to his hollowed waist. Darkness enveloped the shared space as Will picked up the faintest exhales emitting from Abigail's lips. He turned his head slightly to make out the outline of her body. Slumbering peacefully as the rise and fall of her chest was more of a sigh. He approached whilst his hand came to tenderly brush a stray hair away.

The faintest whiff of decayed masked by an overly floral shampoo made Will retract his ministrations. Although he heard her heart thump calmly around in her chest, the blood slushing through her arteries, yet, she was on the cusp of death. A staleness wafted over her though there was an aroma of life still clinging on. He hadn't processed much of what to tell Abigail or whether it'd be the right thing to do. Will robbed her of a demise – an inevitable demise, something he selfishly should've let happen.

Something he was denied of once.

Will bent down to tie his laces and as he rose, he felt gooseflesh prickle his flesh. He looked over his shoulder to find the silhouette of the Anarch masked in the shadows ominously. Will gulped a hardening lump in his throat as the Anarch materialized into the dim light emitting from the television. There was sleep flecked on his smeared eyelids. Brian looked rough, rougher than he appeared normally, and Will saw the exhaustion smudged under his eyes. The fledgling turned around and pressed his back towards the front door.

“Brian.”, he said in a hushed tone. “You’ve arisen.”

The Anarch scrubbed his face with his hands and rolled his shoulders. The eyeliner that was already smeared masked the Anarch’s face grey, and Will looked down towards his feet. If the Anarch hadn’t noticed Abigail by now, he would certainly question her existence in but a few moments. Yet, Brian said nothing as he stretched and cracked his tensed-up joints. He shuffled within his jacket's pocket to retrieve his faithful brand of menthols. He slipped one between his lips and out came a lighter, It's fiery beacon lighting the end of the cigarette. A swirl of thickened smoke expunged from Brian's nose as he seemingly contemplated the act of smoking. He glanced towards Will, then eventually, to Abigail slumbering on the couch ahead of them. Will swallowed and tapped his fingers gingerly onto his thigh. He could explain Abigail or so he thought. She wasn't necessarily a vampire, or at least that's what Will hoped she wasn’t, but then again, there must've been some rule about these kinds of circumstances.

"I can explain should you allow me too.", Will offered coyly, but knowing well that Brian was aware of Abigail's presence.

Brian took a deep inhale of his cigarette and nearly finished it with a single inhale before extinguishing it into the armchair. Will mentally braced for a lecture he surely couldn't win -- given that Brian was decades older than him, with experiences he could never have, and not to mention he was the one attempting to give Will education of the vampiric lifestyle. Yet, the Anarch seemed to be unfazed by Abigail, let alone Will's suggestion of an explanation. Rather, he simply rose and walked quietly towards the kitchen. He flicked on a light to illuminate both the kitchen and partially the living room, and the fledgling watched him quench his thirst with a chilled blood bag. The Anarch disposed of the bag into the garbage before lighting another cigarette. The fledgling watched in bated anticipation as the Anarch consumed his second cigarette.

"You've been busy.", the Anarch suggested mid-exhale, the plume of smoke swirling from his lips. "And look at that, kiddo, you have your own *ghoul*."

Will didn't know whether Brian was accusatory or proud of Abigail's existence though he thought of the former as the Anarch seemed not too happy with the situation. His eyes kept glancing over to Abigail, almost disappointingly, but he feigned it between his exhales.

"At least you didn't make yourself a baby vampire.", Brian continued. "But, a ghoul is pretty much the same thing -- just without the teeth."

When Brian smirked, his fangs glistened down to a point.

"So who taught you how to do that?"

"No one.", Will replied flatly. "She's *not* to be called a 'ghoul'."

"Her name is Abigail."

"Okay, the ghoul's name is *Abigail*. Nice to know."

"Again, she's not a *ghoul*.", Will gritted. Nearby, Abigail shifted and made soft noise in her slumber. Both vampires looked at each other with conflicting thoughts and the conversation continued.

"That's what she is, kid, but hey -- whatever floats your boat.", jested Brian, although Will was slightly irate by being corrected with the specifics.

"Would you like an explanation?", Will offered again. "Or can I leave Abigail in your care?"

Brian flicked his cigarette into the kitchen sink without so much of a hesitation. He grimaced, but his lips turned into a familiar smirk.

“What? You got a hot date or somethin’?”, the Anarch drawled, eyeing how impatient the fledgling became regarding the door. "Seems like you're itching to get away."

“No, I have a funeral to attend.”, Will quipped. “Quite the dreadful affair.”

Brian made a ‘hmph’ as he flicked his newborn cigarette into the kitchen sink. He glanced back over to Abigail blissfully unaware of the vampires as she dreamed, then back to Will. He shrugged his shoulders and pressed his back against the nearby counter.

"I don't see you in your mourning clothes, kid." Brian commented. "Or is it a casual affair?"

"Brian, don't do this.", Will rejected. "I need to leave."

The fledgling ended the interrogation with nothing more but a brisk walk away from the Anarch. Brian caught him by the crook of his arm before he could walk further. Will stood deathly still as his eyes traveled up Brian's arm and up into his eyes. The Anarch's expression was softened, but still overtly worried. The fledgling relaxed as it was unfair of him to disregard his friend's concern.

“You’ve grown, fledgling.”, the Anarch admitted. “Just don’t grow up too fast, yeah?”

Will nodded.

“Will you take care of her?”

“Always -- now and forever.”, Brian released the fledgling's arm and turned around to explore the contents of the fridge once more.

“But don’t forget – you’ll have some explaining to do later.”

The fledgling nodded once more.

Nearby, Abigail had begun to shift on the couch and Will took it as cue to depart. He snuck out the front door just as he caught a glimpse of her head raising up from the couch. Outside, the hallway was awfully quiet except for the humming of the fluorescent beacons above him. He paced down the hall, down the stairs, and out into the foyer looking onto Baltimore.

The air was chilled. The aftermath of rain was like a musk curling into the wind. Dark clouds above threatened another downpour. He walked down the sidewalk towards the darkened urban sprawl of the city at night. Cars zipped by like pesky night insects. People passed, some with slowed heartbeats, other with erratic thumping, and some *without* and Will felt their eyes follow. Like a seventh sense, Will was keenly aware he was being watched, stalked almost, as his previous encounters with the *unnatural* kind led him to believe that he, in fact, was starting to make a reputation for himself.

"*Hungry eyes, empty stomachs*.", the voices rummaging in his skull mocked.

As pedestrians cleared, the fledgling glanced down the avenue. Empty saved for parked cars, the occasional passing stray, and an unwavering sense of danger laid ahead. Will waited at a pedestrian crossing and he felt something rile the hair on his neck. He turned his head slightly and was aware of a figure standing in his peripheral. He turned his attention to the blinking crossing sign and as his foot left the curb, he felt a grasp to his sleeve. Instinctively, he jerked his arm back and turned to face whomever had grabbed him. But, to his surprise, and perhaps to his dismay, there was nothing behind him. He clenched his jaw and studied the emptiness behind him, feeling slightly addled, and quite pestered.

"The mind is quite the circus, lad.", a devilish voice mocked in Will's ear. "Don’t forget your popcorn."

Will abandoned his attention towards walking the street and as he crossed to the other side, he saw the notorious yellow cab waiting for him. He grimaced, but reluctantly approached the yellow cab. Unceremoniously, he opened the cab's door and upon entering the cab, he was startled by another passenger residing inside.

His fellow passenger was cleanly dressed, almost obscenely so, as his silver hair was tucked behind his pointed ears. He kept his hands folded over one another with a ring gracefully drawing the eye. His face was turned elsewhere, but Will made out the delicate, yet well-refined features upon the passenger's face. The passenger turned to look at Will and shockingly, he looked all-to-familiar to someone Will dreadfully already knew. Yet, his eyes were of a darker cobalt, and he was much younger than Will had in mind.

Will awkwardly strapped his seatbelt on just as his fellow passenger did -- those cobalt eyes never leaving Will once, even as he buckled in the restrictive device. The prolonged eye contact left Will permissive. The taxi driver lowered his sunglasses to glance at Will, then the passenger, before raising them over his eyes.

"Where to?", he hollowly drawled. “Anywhere in particular tonight, *fledgling*?”

Will looked over to the passenger then back to the taxi driver. He wasn't sure whether his fellow passenger had a commute of his own as he hadn't said a word since Will entered the cab.

"Don't know -- wherever you're going to take me this time.", Will offered, seeing how the passenger next to him hadn't made motion to speak.

The passenger effortlessly pulled several large bills from within his suit and passed it forward to the taxi driver. Will made a note just as the taxi driver accepted the payment. He clicked the ignition to start the cab and Will's fellow passenger folded his hands back into his lap. He finally looked over to the fledgling but kept a pompous smirk on his face.

An all too familiar kind of smirk.

"Good evening, *Monsieur* Graham.", his accent made the words roll off the tongue like fine molasses. "I've finally had the pleasure to meet you."

Will held back his grimace but kept relatively neutral as he attempted to be polite. He affixed a smile to his face although it felt forced -- only for it to be appreciated momentarily by his fellow passenger. It was a reinforced quirk -- something Will had to adapt upon meeting the likes of Hannibal and others like him, otherwise, he would rather scowl.

"Lacroix.", the passenger continued. "Sebastian Lacroix, the *Prince* of Los Angeles."

The fledgling felt his stomach curl at the revelation of the passenger's title. He looked much like the Prince of Baltimore, minus the pretentiousness, though Will was adamant that he wasn't shown how smug the Prince of Los Angeles could be. He was too well-refined not to be of blue blood, yet Will was more concerned on how a Prince, especially one of Los Angeles, could possibly have known who he was. Another concern was why the Prince of Los Angeles was far away from home -- or better yet was Hannibal aware that another Prince was playing tourist in his city. The fledgling seethed and kept his stare towards the taxi driver.

Treason? Will wasn't taught the specifics of mingling with other vampires not from Baltimore. He was sure that somewhere in the clause there was a strict guideline on the subject, and he was possibly breaking all sorts of procedures. Though it wouldn't have been his fault – the fledgling concluded, he wasn't aware of the Prince of Los Angeles prior entering the cab. Or so he hoped if Hannibal ever found out.

"I've heard you aren't the friendly type, *oui?",* Lacroix continued, eyeing how Will avoided his gaze. "I wouldn't be -- given your history with a colleague of mine."

Hannibal. The fledgling bit the inside of his cheek as he attempted to save face by not reacting to the reveal. Lacroix took note and pursed his lips.

"Don't be afraid, Will.", Lacroix reassured him. "A conversation is not a death's sentence."

Will flinched. As far as he knew, his sentenced had been paused, but hadn't been excommunicated.

"In the utmost respect, I like this city.", Lacroix continued, averting his gaze to the passing cityscape outside their cab. "Reminds me much of home -- the traffic and all, not so much on the cultural aspect."

Will had never been anywhere but Louisiana prior to Baltimore. He wouldn't know if Los Angeles was a cultural mecca if he had been shown it.

"Your Prince is quite hospitable.", Prince Lacroix gently pulled his sleeve back to reveal a glistening watch. He took a moment to read the time before lowering his sleeve. Will studied his mannerisms -- calculated, but very much a ruse to keep the fledgling from building suspicion. Will was keenly aware of the tactics -- Hannibal did the same.

“Can’t say we are friends, but that’s a conversation for another night.”

"Is there a point to this?", Will interrupted, sensing there was something Lacroix was avoiding behind nuanced conversation. "Or should I be aware of a grave dug for me?"

Lacroix's smirk became a tightened frown at the interruption. He looked over to Will with a much familiar, almost identical scowl Hannibal held -- yet, it dissipated once the cab pulled onto the on-ramp for the expressway. Will felt the tension brewing within the cab, but he didn't react frightfully as Lacroix expected -- or wanted -- as the fledgling had groveled too much to blue-blooded pretenders.

"Had enough of my flattery, fledgling?", Lacroix cross-examined, tightening his brow sharply.

Will exhaled and kept his eyes facing the taxi's windshield. Lacroix glared him down, but once he realized Will was not going to cower, he darted his eyes forward.

"*Your* Prince stole something from me", the Prince confessed. "And he's aware that I want it back."

Will's interest was piqued. He thought of Hannibal as many things; cruel, conniving, prideful, but never a thief. Several ideas flipped through Will's brain, but they all came to a cease as he heard the familiar garble of his mind *warning* him.

"*Don’t open the box*.", Will was warned. "*The joker Prince lies.*"

Trusting his instinct, and the voices swirling in his addled brain, Will took heed to the warning. Although Will owed him or Hannibal no loyalty, he was still a Prince with standing and the means of disposing him. The fledgling rolled his head to either side as the taxi driver began to speed up on the expressway. The familiar visage of Baltimore's cityscape became taller as downtown became a closer destination. He looked over to Lacroix with a slight smile to his lips.

"Do you believe I somehow know what Hannibal took from you?", Will asked. "Am I misunderstanding you?"

"No, but you're aware of the *Elizabeth Dane*, aren't you?", Lacroix cross-examined.

Will felt himself tense at the revelation. Lacroix took notice of the sudden shift and again, his smirk creased across his face. The fledgling folded his arms to keep himself from shaking. He could still imagine the blood dripping down his face as he was caressed by the bloodied man from his nightmare -- the vicious screams and flames screeching from Baltimore, and he wished nothing more but to jump out of the cab.

"She was once in my port, but alas, through Hannibal's trickery, he now holds her hostage whilst I'm here playing diplomat.", Lacroix seemed rather heartbroken over the accursed ship.

"You can see why I'm quite bothered. She has something aboard I cannot let my colleague keep from me."

"The box.", Will answered as his throat became dry and his hands clammy. "You want *the* box."

"The *Ankaran Sarcophagus*, yes.", Lacroix confirmed. He signaled to the taxi driver to exit off the expressway and the driver rightfully did so, merging onto the exit and slowing his speed.

Will did not care what the wretched box of his nightmares was called -- he knew better than to get near it, let alone open it, but Lacroix seemed adamant that the *Ankaran Sarcophagus* was his and his alone.

"Hannibal is not well-versed in it's origins or purpose, so naturally, I'm keen to take it away from someone as uneducated in the matter.", Lacroix continued. "You understand, don't you?"

You're a madman. Will wanted to tell that to Prince Lacroix but didn't grace him with his answer.

There was a slight twitch to Lacroix's eye as he didn't receive the agreement, he thought he had out of the fledgling.

"It's quite a *dilemme,* Will.", Lacroix folded his arms and allowed his eyes to drift across the flowing traffic. "On one hand, I must cross an old friend."

Will watched the traffic lessen as the cab began to pull off the expressway into the familiar conglomerate of high-rises. He looked over to Lacroix, who almost seemed saddened, but Will knew that the blue-blooded royalty he had grown to loathe did not feel anything.

"On the other hand, I'll have to murder one of my greatest adversaries.", Lacroix pretended to wipe a tear from his eye. "*C'est la vie*, Will."

The fledgling raised an eyebrow to Lacroix's declaration. There was nothing friendly between Sebastian and Hannibal, that, Will was solidified in knowing. But, to outright announce he was going to *kill* Hannibal left an uneasy chill up his spine. He had no love for Hannibal, let alone tears to shed at his funeral, but he felt that it was forbidden to listen to such a topic. Even then, Will was surely gutted in somehow being an accomplice to Lacroix's plotting – as the fledgling glanced at the cab driver still dutifully driving them across the city. He swallowed and held onto grab handle as he and Lacroix shared a glance.

"You must think of me as a cruel man.", Sebastian asked, his expression become soft, almost boyish like as he attempted to placate himself towards the fledgling.

Narcissus, the fledgling thought as it was starting to be clear the determination Lacroix held regarding the sarcophagus, *constantly vain.* Will darted his lips across his tongue before conjuring up a favorable answer.

“I don’t know what to think of you.”, Will offered as he attempted to keep himself neutral. “But I don’t think you should possess the *box*.”

“*Ankaran sarcophagus*, fledgling.”, the Prince sternly corrected. “And why, Will Graham, should I not have what is *rightfully* mine to be returned?”

Do not open the box. Will felt his skin crawl with a thousand insects as his tongue became twisted. On one hand, he wanted to relieve his nightmarish suspicions onto Lacroix in the hopes that if he had but an ounce of clarity, he’d abandoned the plight of retrieving the sarcophagus, but on the other hand, he owed Lacroix not a mercy.

“I’m sorry.”, Will looked away from Sebastian and back towards outside. “You should return the *sarcophagus* to it’s rightful place; by your side.”

“As you’ve said, Hannibal is a *thief*.”, the words began to sour in the fledgling’s mouth. “And it was wrong of him to take it from you, Prince Lacroix.”

Seemingly pleased, Sebastian’s face lit up with a smile that was chilling to the eye. Will in no form or retrospective was shifting loyalties, as he had none but to himself, but Lacroix didn’t know that. Perhaps he thought of the fledgling disgruntled with his own Prince’s leadership that he was willing to become turn cloak. Yet Will had to preserve himself and his friends before anything else.

“Stop.”, Lacroix ordered the cab driver.

The cab came to a stop in front of a grand hotel; the *Chesapeake Gardens*, as there were a stream of guests entering and exiting the venue. Spotlights shot into the sky like searching beacons whilst valet drivers swarmed and parked cars at an impressive pace. The wealth which Will had always found himself uncomfortable in was perverted as the fledgling imagined the rats underneath the asphalt, digging for scraps, biting at the disadvantaged, yet to the ones above, champagne and cadaver.

Will watched as Lacroix unbuckled himself, then proceeded to groom himself down to a precision he hadn’t thought anyone could achieve. He looked back to the fledgling and offered his hand. The fledgling hesitated, but ultimately rejected Lacroix’s proposal. The Frenchman raised an eyebrow, but silently exited the cab into the dazzling parade that was happening in front of the cab. With the door closed behind him, Lacroix bent down to look at Will once more.

“You could have a place in my court – if you so choose, Will.”, he offered. “Los Angeles would favor you.”

Will looked away just as Lacroix stood straight and faded into the oncoming crowd of hotel visitors. The cab driver glanced at him from under his sunglasses; his violet eyes taking a slightly glow to them. The fledgling cusped his head into his hands just as the cab pulled

forward onto the oncoming traffic. How he managed to get into situations like this, he did not know, but juggling sycophants on one hand, his blossoming friendships, and now an evil sarcophagus made his mindscape crack.

“Where shall I take you, child of Malkav?”, the cab driver offered, his drawl sickly soothing to Will’s ears.

He was going to return to Hannibal, though he didn’t know why he compelled to do such, but there were only very few places he could go. The Anarchs would give him refuge, for a time, till he could face Hannibal again. Alana, though as stunningly familiar he felt around her, often seemed to be but a mere fiction to Will. Her sister was not amiable to the fledgling, however. He could be dutiful and tell Hannibal of Lacroix’s wishes, if the Prince of Baltimore didn’t already suspect his mutual. Will raised his head from his hands and eyed the cab driver.

“Just drive.”, he answered. “Drive far away.”

Brian had done his fair share of babysitting in recent nights, but never, not ever, did he once imagined he’d be looking after a wayward’s fledgling pet ghoul. He was used to wrangling newborn Anarchs from drunken bar fights or the occasional staking, not watching a sleeping beauty of a ghoul in front of him. He keenly watched her; Abigail, as she slept. Completely unaware of what circumstances she was under – the politics of it all, but it wasn’t the Anarch’s place to play politician. Creatures like her simply didn’t exist without a motivation yet, she was born from a fledgling’s clumsiness, or rather, what he thought would save her. He didn’t completely understand Will’s resolve in creating the ghoul in front of him, and he wasn’t exactly certain the fledgling knew the full extent of what his creation was, but he was bound by a promise to watch such a *precious* ghoul.

Occasionally, Brian would kneel next to her, lower his ear to her lips and feel the cool breath exhaling from her nostrils. Her chest would rise slightly, then fall, and sometimes not rise at all. Her skin took on a cool grey tint while the life remaining in her cheeks was of a dull stain. Brian had smelled the many aromas of death – some horrid, others bitterly sweet, while the majority was of stale dirt. However, Abigail had a musk that hovered between life and death. Brian’s nostrils flared for a moment, but he laxed as he stood away from Abigail. It was well past midnight though Abigail hadn’t stirred an inch since her master’s departure.

The Anarch thought to wake her, but it wouldn’t have benefitted either of them; he wasn’t the type to explain vampiric biology or was he ready for such a conversation. He walked back to the kitchen to ignite a cigarette, strangling the burning nicotine with one hard inhale, then exhaling the darkened plume. The Anarch had much on his mind – Matthew, the Sabbat running the streets, and Will’s wellbeing. The stress of it all weighed like stones yet, through the odds and tribulations, Brian still had his heart in the right place. Will and now his ghoul, Abigail, would always have his protection, much like Matthew and Freddie had his. He continued to watch Abigail with his finger tapping against his lips.

“*What am I to do with you*?”, Brian thought to himself. “*You’re far too innocent for this existence*.”

The phone shrilling nearby on the counter drew his attention and to his dismay, awoken the slumbering ghoul in the living room. He silenced the phone once he picked it up and held it up to his ear. Abigail had been startled by the rude awakening as in the faint darkness of the living room, Brian could see her throwing the sheets off her frame and wobbling onto her feet. Before she could turn around and spot him, he exerted his *presence*, making her aware of him just across the apartment. She turned around wide-eyed. It was a look of fear rather than surprise, but Brian neutralized her most natural response to scream, or flee, just by a glare. His brows furrowed as seemingly; the ghoul seemed to think she could fight the extent of his *presence*. He allowed it to push a bit more, but not enough to cause the girl harm.

The phone was silent on the other side and Brian scowled.

“Talk.”, he threatened.

As the silence continued, he flicked his hand which inadvertently caused Abigail to turn away from him and proceed to sit back down. He exerted himself a bit more before Abigail was forced to throw her legs onto the couch, pull the sheets up to her chin, and commanded to stare at the ceiling above her. As cruel as it was, especially to an inexperienced creature such like Abigail, he didn’t need his attention turned elsewhere.

Not flattered by the complete silence on the other hand, the Brujah turned to slam the phone back down on the receiver, but before he could, he heard what he thought was a disappointed sigh. He raised the phone back up to his ear and attempted to listen more.

“You weren’t who I was expecting to pick up.”, the voice on the other end curled around the shell of Brian’s ear like the smooth exhale of a fine cigar.

He couldn’t place the accent as it was foreign, even to his experienced ears. Brian picked up the entire receiver and the cord attached with him. He paced around the kitchen holding the phone as he tuned into the call.

“Who is this?”, he investigated. “Who the hell were you expecting?”

A few moments of silence passed before Brian heard the suave voice answer.

“Certainly not you.”, the other caller responded with a rather disgusted tone.

Brian still couldn’t pinpoint the voice.

“We often don’t see eye to eye, Anarch, but I’m afraid you already know who I am.”

Brian’s face cracked once he truly listened to the other caller. It took every ounce of him not to rip the phone from the wall and stomp into pieces. His blood had begun to seethe with hot anger and his teeth began to grit. Abigail, still completely compelled under Brian’s *presence*, was unable to witness the extremity of Brian’s oncoming outburst. The Anarch stomped back towards the kitchen counter and slammed the receiver down though he held the phone up to his ear still.

The Prince of fucking Baltimore. Brian curled his hand into the granite counter. Streaks began to form from the sheer force the vampire was applying to the countertop.

“Anarch, or whatever you call yourself now, please put William on the phone.”, the other caller asked, though the shift in tone made it sound like a demand.

“Why should I, Hannibal?”, the Brujah argued. “Oh, did I say that wrong? I’m sorry – *Prince* Hannibal.”

“Cheeky, even for you – but I rather talk to William.”, Hannibal replied. “Or better yet, take a message on my behalf.”

The Anarch rolled his eyes back in his skull.

“I’m not your fucking secretary.”, the Anarch said bluntly. “Tell me and I might tell the kid.”

Brian heard Hannibal’s pained sigh on the other side. He loved a bruised ego, especially since Hannibal couldn’t bargain, as the fledgling was out exploring the night. The Anarch figured Hannibal would’ve assumed that the fledgling was elsewhere, but something of importance kept him on the line.

“Tell him I’m rather inclined…”, Hannibal’s voice trailed off, almost as if he had to think about the words that came next. “…for him to visit me again as a matter of importance.”

Brian raised an eyebrow.

“Seriously?”, the Anarch questioned. “You couldn’t put that in a goddamn email?”

The silence was loud. Hannibal must’ve felt embarrassed, if not, a bit outwitted by not conducting their conversation as a short email. Though the latter the Brujah assumed the Prince wanted Will to answer the phone rather than a pissed off Anarch.

“Have a good evening, *Anarch*.”, Hannibal ended the conversation abruptly as Brian stood dumbfounded with the phone against his ear.

He tossed it back down on the receiver and folded his arms. The Prince, in the least amount of words, was Brian’s nemesis and stood against everything the Anarchs dreamed for Baltimore. Yet, he was different here. Although his Princely mannerisms were obliviously present, there was a hesitation Brian sensed. He shook his head. He looked back up towards the clock nearby then back to the phone. He needed to find Will – or the Prince would find him first, and for whatever matter, it must’ve been important enough for the Prince to make a personal house call.

Then again, this was his property. Brian had to admit fault that he too was residing in the Prince’s owned *elysium*. He would pick at the conversation later once he and Will reconvened for the evening. He was going to go out into Baltimore and find the fledgling himself.

He went back towards the living room to retrieve his faithful leather jacket off an armchair. As he donned his jacket, he turned around to see Abigail still painfully looking up at the ceiling. She could hardly move her pupils away from the ceiling without straining. Brian

sighed and released the *presence* he had over her which made the young woman exhale thankfully. She looked at Brian with a mix of fear and relief, more so fear, but as she opened her lips to question what had been done to her – the Anarch silenced her again with a glance. Abigail remained pinned to the couch but she was granted the freedom to look elsewhere but to the ceiling above.

“As much as this might confuse you, kid.”, Brian started. “I’d confuse you even more.”

He began to walk towards the kitchen and the front door. He flicked the lights off for the apartment to leave Abigail whimpering in the dark. There would be a time and place to reconcile what Will didn’t know about how to tell a ghoul their lifestyle, but not now. Brian was determined to contact Will before the Prince could. He walked out the apartment and made sure to lock it behind him with the spare key kept nearby. Abigail would be protected by the right of *elysium* and the Brujah could at least count on some law and order to keep a stake out of her heart.

After all, he did make a promise.

Chapter End Notes

I've finally cranked this out even though I've been incredibly busy for the last few months. Working a full-time job whilst being a graduating student is already trouble as it was. Plus I wanted to take a break from writing for a bit to focus on other hobbies. I hope I hadn't disappointed anyone -- I'm just incredibly lazy.

Still, I'm continuing to write this at my own pace so it's only fair if you keep it bookmarked just in case. The next update will most likely take forever again.
Also when did Ao3 limit how many tags can be on works? That's crazy.
-

There's some unspoken beef between Lacroix and Hannibal I've tried to explore a bit. Long story short, Lacroix is angry that Hannibal somehow swindled the Elizabeth Dane away from him -- and he's using his trip to Baltimore as a means to eliminate Hannibal, take back the Elizabeth Dane, and ultimately do what he pleases with the Ankaran sarcophagus. At this point in the series, we're up to the part where the protagonist of the video game is about to embark onto the Elizabeth Dane to see what the Ankaran sarcophagus is.
Brian is still conflicted whether he should actually take Abigail under his wing as he did with Will because he's a bit disappointed (and shocked) that Will went out and essentially fathered a ghoul (even if Will didn't 100% know what he was doing). He's still juggling teaching Will little by little which it means to be a vampire in Camarilla-ran society and now he's at another roadblock in basically adopting a ghoul into the fold. With the mess going with the Sabbat trickling into Baltimore (and that fiasco Matthew pulled at the Last Call), he has too much to settle. I'm still exploring the implications that come with Brian's ultimate responsibility of ensuring Will stays safe (so he could

eventually become a full-fledged Anarch) while keeping the fledgling's best interest in mind.

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If you haven't or if you already did, feel free to take the survey (or retake). I do periodically add questions as I read over the responses I've been given. Till the next update.

The survey link is on the end notes of the entire work.

Threats

Chapter Summary

Chilton and Bedelia make an uneasy alliance. Hannibal and Will share a moment. Alana is put into a tight spot.

Chapter Notes

Content warning for explicit language. Proof-read minimally for the time being.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XXVI

"Threats"

Dr. Chilton sat uncomfortably in the living chair, the hairs on his neck curled, and a quiver to his bottom lip. His hands trembled while folded in his lap and his throat tightened with every swallow. Sweat had begun to bubble along his forehead. He was sure his good foot was thumping obnoxiously on his renovated hardwood floor. The tea in front of him had cooled, but he didn't find himself particularly thirsty.

He was unprepared for a visit by Ms. Du Maurier. They hardly spoke to one another at social events; she tended to gaze her eyes away from him while shielding her disgust. Even more so in Chilton's current condition – she hardly extended eye contact. They were of two different ranks – she, a close acquittance to the Prince whilst Chilton was a lackey, in the broadest of terms. Whereas she dined and socialized with those prying for power, Chilton bid his time and did what he was told. In a way, Chilton didn't envy their clear difference in respectability, but she was much as a liability than he an asset. In this regard, they were equal, replaceable even.

Yet, when he stumbled downstairs and opened his front door – he was suspicious seeing her. The hour was late. Chilton suffered from insomnia. He still found himself in a walking nightmare. Bedelia, on the other hand, seemed to revel in the night. She was dressed in her finest with pearls strung around her slender neck. There was a fur shawl she kept tucked under her arm and over her shoulder, and a bit of a scowl to her dark lips. Unconsciously, Chilton found himself cowering in her shadow.

As a gracious host, Chilton allowed her entry although it felt he didn't have a choice. She naturally took in Chilton's house – decorated, but modest especially because of the renovations. Her watchful gaze took inventory of the good doctor's abode. Chilton offered her a seat upon a nearby loveseat, and she agreed, gracefully finding respite onto the cushions, then crossing her legs over one another. She looked like she owned the room; her presence commandeered such attention. He excused himself to prepare them tea – a gentle beverage for the hour of night, and she politely accepted it. Her face would flinch whenever she took a sip of the heated beverage and later she'd abandon it to cool on the coffee table. Though he could see it wasn't a friendly visit, he was to be a gracious host.

"Ms. Du Maurier…", Chilton began, the quiver to his bottom lip worsening. "As always, a confidant of our Prince is a friend to me, but I'm unsure of why we're speaking right now…"

Bedelia hid a short frown. She raised the teacup to her lips but abandoned taking a sip as she couldn't mask her annoyance. He could read her expressions as clear as day. His hand found itself readjusting his necktie that seemingly grew into a tight noose.

"With all due respect, of course.", the doctor placated. "You're always welcomed in my home."

Ms. Du Maurier chuckled and brought her hands into a delicate fold over her lap. The way her eyes would crinkle when she laughed before it turned into a tighter squint confessed the aura of danger wafting around her. It was a battle of willpower – Chilton already had a disadvantage in how much he was showed Bedelia his belly, but Bedelia had not exerted the entirety of her dominion. He was to be compliant in all of Bedelia's inquiries, though he had no reason to believe he was to be conscripted in matters that harmed their Prince, and Bedelia expected no less from such a lesser man. Nonetheless, Chilton was to be keen to all demands Bedelia was to lay in front of him as to anger her was to anger Hannibal, and Chilton had done too much damage as of late.

"Kind of you to say so, Dr. Chilton.", Bedelia laxed the coldness normally present in her tone. "How long has it been since we've sat together?"

Chilton had to think on it for a moment. He'd have to say many months, maybe close to a year. Chilton found himself entangled in affairs that left little time for socialization. Bedelia, on the other hand, would have to actually *agree* to be within the same establishment as Frederick.

"A very long time, Ms. Du Maurier.", Chilton insisted. "I take this evening call something of importance rather than catching up?"

"You're quite right.", Bedelia said. "In fact, I need your help."

Chilton's eyes lit up momentarily, but then dulled. What Bedelia was going to propose wasn't going to be of his benefit, naturally, rather it was going to be some sort of bereavement that regardless of his answer, it would be in his best interest to offer his resources. He remained oblivious to what her request would be.

“I’m assuming it’s for the betterment of our Prince?”, he innocently inquired though he knew otherwise.

“Always.”, Bedelia returned the teacup to her lips as the beverage had comfortably cooled. “However, this is a personal inquiry.”

The doctor raised an eyebrow. It felt rather intimate being asked by such a prideful Bedelia Du Maurier. Chilton thought to ask her what soured between her and the Prince for her to stumble so low to such a meek, subservient ghoul. Those thoughts tittered on the tip of his tongue, but he quelled them with a short cough.

“This must stay between us, Chilton.”, the woman narrowed her gaze. “As we are friends, correct?”

“Yes, Ms. Du Maurier.”, Chilton didn’t think they were anything but friends, but for the sake of keeping the skin on his teeth, he agreed.

“Good. You’re familiar with the *Elizabeth Dane*, correct?”

The doctor nodded.

“And you’re aware that she’s currently at port in our city?”

Dr. Chilton swallowed. With the ever so present news coverage of the *Elizabeth Dane*, there wasn’t a person in Baltimore not completely enthralled to the hysteria around the ship. Bedelia, nonetheless, has had to have some inclinations toward the attention the Prince was diverting to the vessel. What intentions Bedelia had for holding such information, the doctor couldn’t say, but he wasn’t so keen on revealing everything to the paramour.

“Yes, I’m aware but many ships of importance come through Baltimor-“, Chilton fumbled his words.

“The *Elizabeth Dane*, Dr. Chilton”, Bedelia harshly alleged. “Don’t play innocent with me. You told Hannibal already, but what else are you hiding?”

Chilton froze. His throat became arid there was a flutter to his heartbeat. He attempted to keep face but found that he was twisting his lips into a fearful scowl. He wanted nothing but to deal with the *Elizabeth Dane* and her accursed reputation. He still grew sickened when he recollected the disturbing footage of *what* was aboard the vessel. He vowed himself to only relay the information to Hannibal, and he still believed that Hannibal would be the most trustworthy to *not* let the *Elizabeth Dane* be despoiled any further. Whatever lied in that gilded coffin, or whomever, Chilton’s heart sunk into his innards.

Bedelia grew annoyed with Chilton’s inability to find his words. She uncrossed her legs and stood upright. In a matter of steps, she was looming over Chilton with a coarseness to her eyes that he’d never witnessed before. Her lips were in a permanent grimace. Her gloved hand came straight onto Chilton’s face and he was forced to look up at her. Her nails dug into his healing skin which made him hiss from the sting.

“What’s in box?”, her grip became tighter until her nails started to draw blood.

Chilton winced as he felt tears bubble in the corner of his eyes. He drawled his eyes up to the ceiling and mumbled a silent prayer; almost like a last exhale. He’d give anything – his flesh, his blood, even his bones if it meant he didn’t have to retell the viscera he’d witness coming out of the box. His innards pranged and churned horribly the more he withheld his anxiety. He looked into Bedelia’s eyes as his tears, mixed with a slight tinge of rouge, began to dribble from his eyes.

“*El monstruo*…”, the phrase slobbered from his lips. “*en el sarcófago*.”

Bedelia’s expression softened although she was still rather furious. Her grip off Chilton’s face lightened as she retracted her hand towards her stomach. She let out a sharp exhale. She took some steps back and turned to look over her shoulder – the moon’s gaze from the open window illuminated her face beautifully. Once she had a moment to settle, she looked back down to Chilton still clutching his chest where his heart threatened to explode from its fleshy cage.

“Translate.”

“The monster in the sarcophagus…”, Chilton said through strangled breaths.

“That’s all?”, she seemed unimpressed, or frankly she expected something of some horrible grandeur rather than twisted fiction. “Really...?”

Chilton choked on the rest of his blubbering sobs. He was practically reeling from the oncoming anxiety assault that Bedelia stepped further away to allow him air. Though the doctor composed himself after a while, the sobbing fit only subsided into sniffles. He was practically in shock on the lack of attentiveness to the catastrophe brewing onto the cursed vessel from Ms. Du Maurier. She stood there like a skeptic – as if Chilton was telling her some outlandish Halloween tale.

“No weapons of mass destruction, or some biochemical disaster waiting to happen?”, she further investigated. “God, you’re a *dramatic* one aren’t you?”

Chilton *knew* what he saw. It wasn’t some monster under the bed quelled by an inquisitive flashlight. What he witnessed was a carnage that he dared not to speak life into. For Bedelia, his most trusted advisor, to just call it a theatric, Chilton was baffled.

“You’re not understanding, Ms. Du Maurier…”, Chilton necessitated. “That *thing* in that sarcophagus would and *will* kill you, me, and this entire city if it escapes.”

Bedelia’s eyebrows rose to a slight point and her face caressed a devilishly smile.

“You mean the *fledgling* as well, don’t you?”, she must’ve savored that notion as she couldn’t help but hide her elated aptitude.

"What does that mean to you?”, Frederick mulled. “It won’t matter once we’re all *dead*.”

The lady shook her head.

“No, at least not yet. Hannibal still has use for that fledgling – for now, but that’s besides the point.”

“You must’ve told Hannibal by now.”

Will Graham was a Malkavian – their insight was prized in many courts, although Chilton wasn’t quite sure if Will had developed such sight. He had half the heart to believe that if Will’s innate ability would reveal the gravity of what lingered on Baltimore’s shores. Then again, Will owed not him, or even Hannibal, the slightest bit of forewarning should death come for its due. He couldn’t blame the fledgling – he’d do the same.

It wasn’t for him to gauge whether the Prince found him useful or not, but Chilton wouldn’t think Hannibal would deploy any lesser but the Malkavian. Against Bedelia’s protests, naturally, and it confirmed her disdain for the unfortunate vampire.

“I did, yes.”, Chilton maintained. “I don’t understand what Will Graham has to do with this…”

“Absolutely nothing.”, Bedelia rolled her eyes and sat on the edge of Chilton’s loveseat. She crossed her legs over and the slit of her dress became dangerously forthcoming. “Then again, absolutely *everything*.”

“You don’t like him, do you?”, the lightbulb finally began to flicker in Chilton’s head. If Bedelia was rid of the fledgling, though Chilton couldn’t ponder any idea why Bedelia was upset over a wayward fledgling, then whatever she felt towards him would dissipate. Vampire society wasn’t for them to understand – Bedelia should know better than to wedge herself between such politics.

“There’s many people I don’t like, *doctor*.”, Bedelia cooed, curling her finger into Chilton’s thinning hair. “Don’t begin to assume my intentions.”

The doctor stifled his disagreement as he allowed the woman to paw at him. However, her finger began to tug awfully harsh, and Chilton was forced to pay utmost attention.

“From now on – any move that *fledgling* makes, you’re going to tell me, hm?”, the coldness Chilton had an uneasy familiarity with started to ease back into her tone. “And I want all your reconnaissance on the *Elizabeth Dane* in real time.”

“But …”, Chilton began but was instantly hushed with another cruel tug to his hair.

“Yes, you will still tell Hannibal *everything*, but you’re going to include me too.”, Bedelia let his hair go and left the arm of the loveseat.

She paced towards Chilton’s front door which prompted the good doctor to wobble to his feet, using his cane nearby as support, but Bedelia saw herself out. She opened the door into Baltimore’s night just as Chilton hobbled behind her.

“We’ll be betraying the Prince”, the doctor reckoned. “He’s not going to be happy we’re going behind his back.”

“No, beloved, *you’re* going behind his back.”, Bedelia counterargued, turning on her heels in the doorway. “I’m simply ensuring I’m well informed in all matters for the betterment of the Camarilla.”

Dr. Chilton could only stare with his eyes agape and his suspicions corrected – Bedelia had an ulterior motive that required Chilton as her sacrament. Whether Hannibal was keen to Bedelia’s schemes, or if there was a scheme to be discovered, Chilton worried. His relationship with the Prince was already icy given his recent failures, but he was not to be apart of a scorned lover’s ploy. His guts told him to slam the door in her face and dial Hannibal’s number – but knowing Bedelia’s deceitfulness and some tearful musings, Hannibal would rather stake him rather than believe him. Frederick sighed and gave in.

“Please, Ms. Du Maurier.”, the doctor pleaded. “You haven’t seen the horrors I’ve seen on that ship.”

“Oh, I know.”, Ms. Du Maurier took a step out of the doorway. Behind her, a waiting car was started and remained idled. “But, the fledgling hasn’t.”

She descended the steps of Chilton’s porch and into the waiting car. The way her body swayed was of pride. The way her steps was jubilant in her preconceived victory frightened Chilton. The woman simply couldn’t comprehend the danger Baltimore would be if that *thing* aboard the *Elizabeth Dane* would be. No one could protect her, him, or not even the Prince. He hoped whatever sour feelings Bedelia seemed to harbor against Will Graham was fleeting – for the path she was walking on was of carnage.

“Goodnight, *handsome*.”, she mocked and the driver of the vehicle got out to escort her within the car.

He watched her as she disappeared inside the vehicle, and it began to drive off into the night. He grimaced and slammed his front door. It took every fiber of his body not to just dial the Prince and warn him of his paramour’s inclinations, but in doing so would incriminate himself in agreeing to her arrangement. He needed the night to think. He hobbled up the steps of his home with an itch to settle.

“Stop here.”, Will ushered the cab driver to pull over towards a familiar high-rise.

Dutifully, the cab driver brought them to a halt under a streetlamp. Will gave the cab driver a long look, just as the cab driver did the same with an eerie purple lining around his eyes, and the fledgling got out the cab. It lingered for a few moments until Will took a few steps in front of the front gate of the residence he started to loathe the most; the Prince’s. The gates opened for him on their own accord. Gargoyles with their stone eyes peeled back their eyelids to watch Will enter their guarded fortress. There was at tight lump that had started to gestate in his chest as he walked into the lobby. He’d visited such sacrosanct earth before, but each time he came here, an uncomfortable uneasiness always remained. He dug his fingernails into his palms.

“It’s as if I’m attending my own funeral procession.”, he caught himself saying aloud, although not but a rat, or a hallucination, heard him.

The lobby was blaring white. The harsh smell of bleach was like a musk that made Will's nose crinkle. Nearby, the low buzzing noise of a floor scrubber echoed around the lobby. The slight thud of the door closing behind him was but a whisper. Even looking down, the floor reflected his visage in almost a crystal-clear image. Will looked up. The security guard, Franklyn, was aware of Will's entrance and he straightened up in his swivel chair.

He looked how Will remembered him last; disheveled and aloof. There was an attempt of a beard trying to flourish under prickled skin that would've been better off razored. His uniform smelled of cheap detergent and musk. Will noticed the dark circles underneath fretful eyes.

Him and Will made eye contact, but it was an unspoken conversation between them as the security guard resumed his routine and slid a clipboard over to the fledgling. Will equipped the pen offered along with the clipboard and did a quick scribble of his name. His eyes lifted to find Franklyn's fleeing from the prolonged eye contact. Will hadn't uttered a word, but enough had already been said.

Would you mourn my death? Will gazed at his haphazard signature on the lined paper in front of him. *Could you leave flowers at my grave*?

"Mr. Lecter wasn't expecting visitors.", Franklyn suggested although Will wasn't one to make appointments.

Will shrugged his shoulders.

"Neither do the dead.", the fledgling replied flatly.

Will slid the clipboard back towards Franklyn. He stepped away from the counter and walked up the short steps up towards the elevator. He felt Franklyn's eyes bore into his back. His heartbeat was at an uneasy tempo, but it softened once Will was much closer to the elevator. The vampire gave a gaze back to Franklyn idling at his desk and then he pressed the summon button.

After a slight wait, the first elevator 'pinged' and the doors slid apart, allowing the fledgling prompt entry and it ushered him straight up to the appropriate floor.

Once inside, Will took inventory of his situation. The hard lump that had sat in his chest prior to entering the sky-rise remained but a breathless exhale. The numbers within the elevator climbed steadily. He chewed on his bottom lip as he watched them go up, and up, until he felt the floor underneath him slow.

He thought about Prince Lacroix. The Frenchman was rightfully angry with Hannibal, at least that's what Will gathered, but he couldn't shake the feeling that there was a deeper grievance afoot. Will had reason to loathe Hannibal given he was the sole reason he ended up this way, but Lacroix's hatred was deeper, festered like a cancer. The elevator was starting to become even slower as Will recollected how Lacroix spoke of Hannibal. He was a man scorned, thrice-scorned even, and if he was powerful as Princes seemed to be, Hannibal had a villain near his caliber.

On the other hand, it'd would've been easier to leave Baltimore behind. Will was tired of the confrontations. Los Angeles could be the start he needed. Will sighed. He could take Abigail with him, convince Brian to come with them, and ultimately leave the craziness that was Baltimore. The Anarch would disagree, like he normally would, and Will would've have had to convince him otherwise. But, he would go with Will because he made that promise, now and forever, he'd always be at his side. He would've liked to believe he'd be happier there, but, there was an anxiety that came with that fantasy. He could only run so far before Hannibal, or something worse, caught up to him.

Unfinished business. Will recognized the familiar "penthouse" floor of the elevator. *Too many loose ends.*

Hannibal was still owed Will's revenge. A part of him wanted to drive the stake in Hannibal himself. Will wouldn't speak life into his fantasy though it danced on his tongue. It'd be a sacrilege to allow the stake to pierce the Prince's heart, so intimate it would be to watch the life fade from sanguine eyes, and feel death's rattle and the hot ash that'd burn Will's face. It was the most Will could do if he were to leave Baltimore. An act of regicide before city life and beach air became his permanent life.

He could taste it on his tongue like snowflakes in winter. His fingertips tingled with a morbid excitement. The fantasy curled around his brain like a neatly tied ribbon on a gift box. He swore he could feel himself salivating.

He stopped.

The elevator paused completely and its wide doors slid open. Will took a step out and already noticed the doors for the penthouse was already open and welcoming towards him. With a slight sense of caution to his steps, he walked inside and found that it was dark saved for the moon beaming all around the space.

He knew of the space he was wandering into; where the hallways led, where the staircase would take him to, and who he would be greeted by. Yet, there was a silent solace in the air, like the stillness before a rainstorm, and Will was at ease with it. The air was reminiscent of extinguished candles; warm but fleeting with a whisper of smoke. He walked the slight steps down into living room. He took it upon himself and sat. He exhaled a shaky breath that had remained guarded in his chest since he was riding in the cab.

Have I made it to the end of the procession? The darkness was empty. The light from nearby high-rises hardly illuminated the penthouse space as Will sat in the bleak quietness. He thought to turn on a light but settled with the dark.

The fledgling scrubbed his face with his hands. He turned his head over his shoulder and still found himself alone. He thought Hannibal would've been alerted to his presence by now, or at least stalking him from some dark corner nearby. He was but a lonely guest in a lonelier home. There wasn't a sense of life within the encased penthouse. No portraits, no familiarity other than what was remembered, not even the furniture felt it was at home. Will remembered his home; sweltering, sometimes unbearable, but it was indeed home. He could still map out every inch of his childhood home. Yet in this space, he was a stranger. Even the couch underneath him wouldn't hold the imprint he made into the cushion.

“How lonely is he?”, Will caught himself thinking. He pursed his lips together. He shouldn’t care about the Prince’s lonesome abode.

The last time he was here – he dissected what the Prince hid behind his charisma and tailored suits. Beyond the flesh and cashmere, Will saw a wounded, forlorn beast, begrudgingly forcing itself to gorge itself on carrion.

The Prince was scorned with Will’s analysis, or maybe, he delighted in the criticism. It seemed everyone around the Prince, whether they feared him, adored him, or absolutely loathed him, didn’t seem to give him the satisfaction of a critique. Or, Hannibal didn’t want to see him anymore. Although unlikely, Hannibal didn’t seem the type to tuck tail.

Will held his reserve as he only held the Prince’s interest momentarily. He was only as important to him as Will remained interesting. When that interest soured into contempt, or rather, boredom, he’d eat his flesh and rid the bones.

He’d hunt Will. As lonely as he seemed to be, he starved for more. He’d track him deep into the woods where Will couldn’t escape – frighten him, corner him, then rip the skin from his carcass. He wouldn’t waste a morsel; Will’s innards would be a delicacy along with his heart, his brain, even the marrow within his bones. As vicious as rabbits could be, they were but of a small stature, whilst wolves conquered with teeth and fangs. The fledgling would opt to defend himself but with such a ravenous Hannibal kept tempered underneath his refinement, Will would bare witness to Hannibal as he’d consume his body, unable to do anything but to writhe in the pain till his last breath.

And he wouldn’t leave flowers at my grave. The fledgling’s gums tingled. He should’ve fed before he left.

The fledgling heard a door opened followed by footsteps echoing somewhere in the darkness. His still-beating heart fluttered a few beats in tandem with the footsteps coming closer until the echo silenced with but a soft exit. Will slightly turned his head only to find it caressed by a hand that was used to enacting cruelty rather than humility. His eyes traveled up the digits, up to the wrist, and finally up to the arm it ultimately belonged to. Hannibal was like a ghost haunting at the midnight hour; pale and wraith-like. His eyes glowed a demanding scarlet in the shadows that obscured him, but it was all-to familiar feeling of Will feeling his skin was being peeled back by such a gaze. He moved his face slightly away, but the Prince cusped Will’s chin between his fingers. The gesture demanded Will’s attention.

“*William*.”, Hannibal’s voice was husky, almost like it was conjured out of a deep slumber. “You’re always a surprise.”

“Be careful, *Hannibal*.”, his gums started to throb rather than tingle. “I might bite.”

Hannibal’s finger had grazed the bottom of Will’s lips. The fledgling would’ve not allowed the Prince to be close in such a physical sense, but he did not pull away or bare his teeth. Though Hannibal didn’t chastise him for the usage of his name, Will felt the unspoken threat gliding across his skin. Hannibal dragged Will’s bottom lip as it began to touch the end of his chin before the finger ran its course back down to his chin.

“If I compelled you to bite, would you draw blood?”, Hannibal further teased, watching the clench Will kept to his jaw.

“I’d maul you.”, the fledgling held no hesitation in his response. “Till I could taste the marrow in your bones.”

Dangerous. Will thought and slightly cringed at his abrasiveness. *He’s not going to like that*.

The Prince had a crackle of a smile across his lips. Will was beginning to learn the leeway he had with his disrespect. Hannibal seemed titillated at Will’s abrasiveness. He gradually loosened his fingers from Will’s face which prompted the fledgling to turn completely away from the Prince. His gaze remained out towards Baltimore where the zipping of airplanes in the night’s sky was reminiscent to cicadas on the pond shore. Hannibal snapped his fingers softly which commanded the lights of the penthouse to gradually lighten their shared space. Will hardly reacted except when Hannibal came around to sit across from him. Will’s gaze was commandeered but to focus on Hannibal. He was to take in the regal presence that was of the Hannibal Lecter, Prince of Baltimore, the hunter of hunters. Will raised an eyebrow but waited on bated breath for Hannibal to lash the first veiled innuendo.

“You look rather bothered, William.”, Hannibal commented, eyeing how Will was abnormally collected, rather than falling apart at the seams with his previous anxieties. “Or, someone has bothered you.”

“No, I’m not bothered.”, Will disregarded Hannibal’s calculation. “It’s my funeral today, I’m elated.”

“Have you invited your guests?”, the Prince of Baltimore indulged in Will’s delusion. “Or was it to be a private affair?”

Will shook his head. His funeral was to be a closed casket.

“Have you been bothered by someone?”

Hannibal shrugged and crossed his hands in his lap. The Prince wouldn’t be bothered, not normally, as his life was relatively easy considering he was who he was. All his responsibilities included was to look prim and proper, smile, and play the part. Though, he didn’t look as defined as he did normally. His hair had been greased back although not quite as slick, his tie was undone down to his collar one, and Will could make out the dark circles blushing under the eyes.

Will made a note.

“Not particularly, William.”, the Prince offered. “Although there have been changes these last few nights that have very much surprised me..”

The fledgling perked up an eyebrow as he lounged. He picked up the note that Hannibal was not being overtly coy with his intentions. The Prince casted a gaze back Will’s way and the corners of his eyes crinkled as he began to analyze. Will hated when he did that; it left him exposed.

“You, on the other hand, continue to surprise me.”, Will felt his heart sank into his intestines. “Has Lacroix glamoured you about his sorrows against me?”

He hadn’t mentioned Prince Lacroix, at least, not yet in the slightest. He began to feel his mouth dry with a quickness and his lax demeanor straightened. Hannibal noticed and he was quick to exploit the change.

“He…”, the Malkavian trailed off. “Did mention you, amongst some other things…”

Hannibal nodded.

“Did you believe him?”

“It has two mouths to lick from.”, Will echoed back. “I believe as much as the prophet does.”

Hannibal didn’t seem placated with that. Will bit at the inner flesh of his cheek. Lacroix was as much as a liar as Hannibal a sycophant. He didn’t have to believe either of them to know he was unwise to place his trust in them.

“You aren’t one to fraternize with the enemy, William.”, the Prince continued. Even in such dim lighting, Hannibal’s gaze was even brighter towards Will. “As insightful as you Malkavians are, you’d be able to decipher a ruse.”

Will didn’t agree or disagree. He continued to listen.

“I’d love to believe you’re…”, the Prince trailed his words just as his bodyguard, seemingly appearing from smoke, stood at the top of the staircase. Will caught the sight of him and his body felt it could turn into ash at the very moment. His hands felt clammy and he tucked them underneath his arm pits. The ramifications and possibilities swirled around in his head as Hannibal never let his crackle of a smile dim.

“…misguided, and perhaps it’s to my better judgement to steer you away from such people.”

Hannibal stood up and began to cross the space between them. Will stiffened as the Prince approach. What confidence Will inflated himself with dissipated into the excruciatingly paralyzing anxiety he’s always kept towards Hannibal. He was uncomfortably close to the fledgling as those scarlet eyes latched deep into Will’s silver. The fledgling found himself inching away further onto the back of the couch.

“You know as much as I know, Lacroix is not a friend.”, Hannibal warned. “Neither am I to you.”

Will swallowed. Not in a thousand nights would he ever consider Hannibal a friend, not even an acquittance, just his captor.

“Am I to be placed into my grave?”, Will uttered. “Let this be my funeral, and you my priest, and let not my grave go undug.”

Hannibal’s face crinkled as he momentarily took note of Will’s crazed riddle. He chuckled softly and brought his hand p to his mouth. He widened the distance between the and sat back

on the other sofa. Will heard his chuckles underneath his hand and instinctively, he scooted himself closer towards the edge of the sofa.

“I couldn’t hurt you.”, he heard Hannibal confess. “For you’re entirely blameless in this affair.”

Blameless. Will mulled over the phrase a few times. *If Hannibal only knew*.

“He called you a thief.”, Will echoed. “A thief, a liar, and he offered me a place in Los Angeles…”

Hannibal raised an eyebrow.

“Really?”, the Prince mused. “I heard Los Angeles has wonderful weather.”

“I wouldn’t know that.”, Will crossed his arms. “But, you’re avoiding the obvious.”

“What, dear William?”

“Did you take something from him?”

“He’s a hurt man, no, a boy – really, I never considered Sebastian to be mature.”, Hannibal continued. “A Frenchman’s blues, I suppose.”

“But, yes, I did.”, the Prince agreed. “Though I acquired his loss through not fault but his own.”

“I agreed with him.”, Will folded his hands in his lap. He looked over to Hannibal with a sullen look. “…that you’re a thief.”

The Prince raised an eyebrow, but didn’t pursue the accusation. Instead, he snapped his fingers which prompted his hulking bodyguard to appear almost out of thin air. Will turned his head to catch the bodyguard bowing respectfully, before completely disappearing once again. He came back holding a gilded tray with two elongated glasses and a vintage of red between them. Dutifully, the platter was sat in front of them, and the bodyguard uttered not a word, or compliant, not even a stare towards the fledgling’s way. Hannibal poured their red into their respectful glasses. A silent offer lingered in the air and Will took his glass straight up. Hannibal was slightly amused by will’s new found aptitude in taking beverages, but the fledgling needed to quench the thirst he had forced to subside.

“Why?”, such a simple question sent a prang to Will’s guts. “Do you think I’m a thief?”

And so much more. Will thinned his lips into a tight frown and couldn’t bring himself to respectfully respond. He’d have to gnaw off his own tongue if he’d told Hannibal the slightest inclination of how he felt about him.

“I should ask you more about myself as you seemingly enough know more about myself than I.”, Hannibal jested, but his tone still harbored some hurt. Will had to remember he did scratch the surface and perhaps it was deep enough to hurt Hannibal’s ego a bit.

“My honesty is harsh.”, Will agreed. “But there’s something I think you should know…”

Hannibal was piqued. He’d brought his own glass of red to his lips yet it lingered against his lips as he waited on bated breath for whatever the Malkavian across from him had to profess. Will swallowed the lingering anxiety he had begun to digest. Prince Lacroix knew of the *Ankaran sarcophagus* and he couldn’t withhold it any further. Will’s skin prickled when he was reminded of that gilded coffin. He looked to Hannibal for confirmation, more so affirmation, and the Prince obliged him with a titter.

“The *sarco*-…”, he started to trail off as his words seemingly became lost of his tongue. “I mean…uhm.”

“William.”, Hannibal’s tone uttered the pressure he was beginning to exert onto the fledgling. “Find your words.”

“The Prince of Jokes isn’t too fond of his own jokes.”, a haughty voice mocked. “*Such a bad comedian*.”

Other voices chimed in to swirl a cacophony in his head, but Will quieted them by pressing his fingernails into his palms. He took in an inhale then exhaled.

“Don’t open the *Ankaran* sarcophagus.”, the warning rolled off his tongue like a curl of tobacco smoke. It left his mouth with a bitter aftertaste, but the afterglow of the hit was the relief.

“Do *not* open it, or you’ll kill us all.”

There was silence like the kind after a movie has ended, but with no claps, or cheers, just a finished silence rolled in like credits. Will sat there crumpled with his face into his hands as Hannibal finally took the first sip. He returned the glass to the platter, and then ran his hands threw his already tussled hair. The Malkavian aired the unspeakable terror he harbored from conspiracy into reality. He shuddered to think what would come forth from his confirmation of the *Ankaran sarcophagus*’s truth, but Hannibal was as silent as he never been.

“You’ve confirmed my theory.”, Hannibal finally said, standing from the couch. He walked over to the Malkavian and offered his hand. Will looked up at him and raised an eyebrow. He looked down to Hannibal’s open hand then he slowly slipped his hand towards the Prince. As Hannibal helped him to his feet, the Malkavian felt the grip tighten.

“What theory…?”, Will asked rather innocently as the grip remained firm. “What madness have you concocted?”

Hannibal smiled wryly. Though there was a slight difference in their height, he dipped down to where he was eye level with the Malkavian.

“I already made it certain I wouldn’t open the *Ankaran sarcophagus*.”, Hannibal suggested, as if it was such a noble deed to not do the unfathomable. “Though many would try.”

“You know as much as I that the power within that sarcophagus cannot, and will not, be unobtainable forever.”

“You’re the Prince, for *fuck’s* sake!”, the Malkavian argued. “You can make the sky drop if you wanted to!”

“William, no –”

“NO! NO! NO!”, the Malkavian shouted and attempted to twist his arm away. “*You* can stop this! You KNOW what’s inside that box.”

Hannibal laughed *hard*. Will stood aback. The grip tightened to the point Will winced with the sudden pain. The Prince of Baltimore had to wipe a few tears from his eyes before he regathered his composure.

“We’re on the precipice of something much *greater* than you, me, and this city.”, Hannibal explained “and you and I will watch it all unfold from this very place.”

“I don’t understand…”, Will couldn’t shake out of Hannibal’s vice grip. He thought to jerk his hand back, but didn’t dare whilst Hannibal was within an arm’s reach of pulling him even further. “It can never be opened, *Hannibal*, ever.”

“And yet, we will be here to inherit the earth once it happens.”

That was a threat. Will jerked his hand back. He was not to be conscripted further into the madness brewing around the accursed sarcophagus. He’d take his execution on the spot rather than wait for *whomever* inside that box to rip him to shreds first. Hannibal allowed him to make the distance between them. However, the Prince still kept that loathsome smirk across his face.

“Neither of us would open it, but it will be opened, eventually, and even then, I wouldn’t be able to stop it.”, the Prince rationalized. “As is the nature of all curses.”

“I much rather have us as the inheritors rather than the disinherited.”

“What are you trying to offer *us*?”, Will continued to step further away from Hannibal and back towards the door. “All are blind whose eyes are closed.”

“You made it very clear to me, fledgling.”, Hannibal extended his hand out to where Will stood across the room. “I am a creature of loneliness and should hell bathe us over, then I’d rather have *you* in the hellfire.”

“If you would have me on that night, *William*.”

It felt like he’d been set ablaze. Will didn’t know whether to laugh, cry, a combination of the two, but only stood astonished. His guts twisted ten times over and the blood he’d just drunk seemingly was like dust in his throat. He didn’t know what to say. It was one thing to threaten the death of everyone he’d ever known, but to confess the desire if they were to die, Hannibal would rather die with Will. He felt the throes of nausea beginning to settle in his stomach which prompted him to turn on his heels to run towards the stairs.

Upstairs, he raced into the first door he saw, which thankfully, was a bathroom which he proceeded to regurgitate the contents of his stomach into the porcelain bowl in front of him. His expelled bile with tinted bright red as he held the sides of the bowl. He eventually collapsed onto his side as his stomach burned from the exertion. He inhaled and exhaled raggedly with his arm thrown over his face. He heard Hannibal's steps coming closer, but he couldn't draw strength to get up on his own accord. He felt arms raise him off the floor, and then he was supported back onto his feet. Will couldn't wrestle with Hannibal even if he tried. He was led further upstairs into a familiar room; purple walls, gold trimmings, void of all windows. He was allowed to gently fall onto a softened bedspread. Above him, he watched as Hannibal diligently undid his shirt now stained with red vomit. His legs were brought over the bed in order to disrobe his shoes then they were gently placed somewhere not within sight.

"He's preparing you for slaughter.", a voice warned, as more of his clothing ended elsewhere. "I see the daggers on his breath."

The Malkavian was helpless. A looming catatonia glossed over his eyes as he could only stare straight up into the darkness enveloped in the room around him. The corners of his lips dribbled tinted drool down his jaw and onto the bedding. He was paralyzed with the visage of bloodied terror crawling forth from the sarcophagus. Hannibal didn't know – no one knew what Will witnessed. As the Prince continued to adjust him onto the bed, the Malkavian only whimpered in defeat. He saw Hannibal's face loom over him once more before it came closer and the soft embrace of a kiss on his forehead remained. Will's eyes traveled away from shadow above him, towards Hannibal, then ultimately, he watched as Hannibal was more of a phantom than a person.

"You have started to mean something to me, William.", even his voice sounded distant. "Of course, you won't understand it now."

"You're…", Hannibal's voice trailed off. "…something I haven't had before."

The door closed softly and Will was left immobilized in silence. His limbs hardly twitched as he didn't react to Hannibal's departure. In this very moment, his existence was but void. It already felt he was inside his casket, being lowered into the dirt, and prepared for the maggots to feast on his flesh. He didn't begin to move until he was certain Hannibal was far away or wasn't listening on the other side of the door, and that's when Will curled into a ball. In his nakedness, he retreated into himself and shuddered.

"*This is a place of death*.", Will repeated, over and over till he felt his voice starting to strain. "*and I'm attending my own funeral*."

He must've repeated the phrase until he couldn't whisper, because as the night grew younger, he was fatigued. Hannibal hadn't revisited him, or anyone for that matter, but Will only murmured the voiceless nothings until his mind forced him to rest, for his own sanity, and whatever there was left.

Alana watched from afar with a lonesome look upon her face. She was put out of her sister's usual business meetings, naturally, Bella didn't think she was mature for such topics. The

hallway was her meeting space, really, as she was the first to see her sister's cohorts, and the first to make bets whether Bella would let them walk out alive. They paid her no attention, of course, as Bella, time and time again, convinced the masses that Alana was no better than a neighborhood junkie.

There was a bit of truth to the association, but Alana could hold her own in a conversation. Men liked to talk especially when they were happy, or drunk, seemingly the same in Alana's world.

Yet, here she was again, unloved, and suffocated under her sister's rules once again. She came back to *The Insanitarium* after a few nights walking Baltimore with a clouded head. She got tired of couch hopping and stale coffee, really, and was too spoiled not to have her own bed. *The Insanitarium* was always home regardless on who dwelled inside.

It'd be short-lived. Bella would eventually put her out *again*, and as usual, Bella would eventually let her back in like the stray puppy Alana made herself out to be. This time, however, her sister didn't say a word, rather, she allowed Alana inside without an argument. It'd been like that for a few nights. Alana would purposefully flirt with *kine*, dabble with the local thin bloods, even bed strange men in her sister's bed, but Bella didn't kick her out in anger or threaten to kill her. It was strange now that Alana was privy to Bella's meetings once again.

She is my sire after all. Alana thought as she looked down towards her heels. *She couldn't abandon me, even if she had a choice*.

Their current arrangement was fine with Alana for the most part. Nothing about politics or business seemed interesting to Alana.

She liked to dance, and drink, and party, not be tied down with all the professionalism. But, this meeting was particularly different as there wasn't agreements in the air, rather, all Alana heard at first was yelling and disagreements. Occasionally, the door would slam and a disgruntled person would flurry out the meeting room, but it'd been quiet for too long. Alana was forbidden from entering unless Bella demanded her presence, but the younger sister couldn't help *but* grow awfully curious at the silence.

She pushed her back off the wall and slowly made the approach to meeting room. Her hand tentatively reached towards the doorknob. She compelled herself to just grab the doorknob and she did, turning it, until the door gave way and she slipped inside. The musk of cigarettes floated in the air amongst the smell of spilled blood. Alana's nose crinkled as she entered. She closed the door behind her and looked around. No one was seated which was rather odd because Alana remembered at least half a dozen men trotted in here with their big wallets, and even bigger egos. The lights were dimmed, much to dimmed for Bella's liking, and Alana felt a bit of uneasiness in the air. She took a couple steps forwards, but as she looked down towards her heels, she saw blood pooled around them.

She tensed. Her first thought was to Bella. If someone had planned to attack them, Alana would've thought she would've heard it first. There were no signs of an attack; no broken glass, no overturned chairs, not even blood splatter on the walls. The blood present was

congealed onto the tile. The elongated table was smeared with viscera. As Alana paced further inside, she made out the scratch marks in the wood.

“A struggle…”, she said aloud. “Someone fought here.”

She looked around the room until she heard the door on the opposite side of the room beginning to open. Across from her, Bella stepped out from behind that door, blood dripping from her curls, down to her feet. In one hand, she was grasping a severed arm, while in the other was someone’s face.

Alana thought she was seeing some mad affliction her crazed mind conjured. She stood there with her mouth agape. Bella didn’t even notice her sister’s presence as she dropped the flesh in her hands to waltz over to her swivel chair at the head of the table. She sat down and that’s when her eyes finally met her sister’s.

There was something horrible about the silence. Even more scary than her sister covered in viscera whilst all her guests assumed to be mauled somewhere in the other room. People didn’t die in silence even when the old died in the night. To the degree that Bella appeared to have slaughtered whosever’s corpses in the next room, Alana would’ve heard a discord of terror.

Alana was hesitant to approach, but ultimately, she took baby steps towards Bella. She was the last person she hoped her sister wouldn’t murder, for the most part, and Alana kneeled next to her sister in the swivel chair. She was terrified but she tried to feign it away with a gentle smile.

“Bella?”, Alana asked though it came out more like a croak. “Are you alright?”

Her sister didn’t say anything at first. She just wiped her hands on top of her blazer, but it hardly made a difference given she was soaked with blood. Bella gently tapped her manicured nails on the table, then made a soft ‘hmm’ under her breath. She casted a sideways gaze towards her sister then a smiled crept onto her lips.

“Haven’t you heard?”, Bella beamed and Alana could see the gore between her sister’s teeth. “Oh, please don’t tell me you haven’t heard about it?”

Alana was perplexed. She didn’t know what her sister was elated about. Alana was too drunk most of the time to listen to the news, let alone read a newspaper, and she hadn’t heard anything new on the streets. She shook her head.

"I’m sorry, Bel…”, Alana confessed. “I really don’t know what’s going on.”

Bela launched out of the swivel chair which caused it to fly backwards towards the wall. Alana was startled at the sudden jump, but she remained down on her knees as Bella lowered to hers. Alana watched the blood that had trailed from underneath the other door come closer to them. She gulped, but kept her painted smile towards her sister. Alana figured it was best to go along with whatever delusion Bella was experiencing. Her sister’s blood-drenched hands came up to either side of her face and Alana held back a disgusted whimper.

“Deep of the Atlantic, the Ark, dreaming, sleeping…”, Bella uttered like a forbidden fairytale. “Filled with blood and hungry.”

Alana wasn’t following. She was startled more than she was intrigued, more so, worried about the depth of Bella’s latest delusion. She wanted to wiggle-free from the embrace, but she knew better not to upset her sister in this state. As Malkavians, their fits of madness changed like night to day, but Bella always had them harder than Alana. Alana always figured since she indulged in her vices, her madness calmed underneath the haze of booze and sex, but Bella, so uptight and insecure about her public image never once let herself go. It would gnaw under her skin till ultimately, she would be in a rabid state for nights on end.

Yet, this one was different. Her proneness to insanity never once had her murder her associates, let alone to this degree, and Alana only watched as the glossiness in her sister’s eyes further delude her.

“A casket built just for us.”, Bella rambled. “Deep inside to hold us both.”

“Bella…”, Alana said softly, bringing her sister and her sire closer in for a hug. “I’m sorry.”

Her sister tightened her arms around her and Alana felt her own tears trail down her face. As many times she gave Bella living hell, she couldn’t leave her in such a state. They would have to explain the possible mauled vampires in the other room, and Alana figured they weren’t alive by the amount of blood pooled underneath them, but for this moment, she could only hold her sire close.

“We’re going to go downstairs.”, Alana began as she brushed away Bella’s curls to see more of her sister’s bloodied face. “And get cleaned up, right?”

The cloudiness behind Bella’s eyes had begun to evaporate into clarity as Alana was starting to recognize her again. Bella blinked once, twice, then finally realized. She looked at Alan with widened eyes then pushed her younger sister away. She got up and was aghast at the state she was in. She raised her hands up to her face and her expression scrunched into defeat. Alana got herself back up, but now her clothes were drenched in the same viscera her sister was coated in.

“Bella…”, Alana attempted to placate her sister. “You had another fit…”

“Be quiet.”, her sister hissed, further distancing herself from her childe. “Don’t…”

Alana remained silent and got back up to her feet. The blood was on both of them, however, Bella seemed to grow horrified with the amount around them. It was kind of bittersweet seeing a vampire surprised by blood. Alana crossed her arms.

“Don’t…”, Bella had said with her voice breaking off into a sob. “…don’t even look at me.”

Her sister did just so; her gaze went elsewhere. Bella held guilt like a parishioner did after a confession. The Baroness sniffled and tried to step around the pools of blood staining the tile floor, but it was futile as the blood was practically dripping off her. Alana only watched in silence, careful not to upset her sister and sire any further, but made sure she remembered the

moment. It was a rarity to see Bella defeated in such a way and it brought a bit of venomous joy to Alana's mood. However, Alana was past cheap shots at revenge. She only suffered in silence and her sister's shadow.

Her sister broke the most heinous of *Traditions*; *destruction*. She had no right to murder her guests. Her defense of madness wouldn't spare her life should the Masquerade catch wind of her crimes. Alana gulped the more she took notice of the blood around them. Not a gurgle, or plea of help came from the other side of the door.

Corpses. Alana could imagine the carnage that went on just hours before. *Corpses and their maggots*.

Bella pulled out her cellphone from her blazer's pocket and shakily began to dial. Alana took that as a cue that she was no longer appreciated. She excused herself, but before she left the meeting room. Bella snapped her fingers at her. Alana looked over her shoulder and raised an eyebrow.

"You say *nothing* of this, Alana.", the Baroness warned. "Or I'll have your throat."

An empty threat for the most part. Alana tried to wipe off some of the blood on her hands onto her skirt, but alas, her hands was just as bloodied as the murderer in the room.

"And I love you too, sister.", Alana allowed the door to slam behind her just as the elevator nearby chimed with some upcoming visitors.

Down the hall, men wearing black and wielding black suitcases marched past Alana without a word uttered between them.

She knew them well; Bella's personal clean-up crew. Whenever the Baroness had her *accidents*, the men in black would always come, day or night, and wiped everything clean. Though she wasn't sure how much her sister paid them given they could've been found guilty on their role in covering the crime. It must've been a handsome amount if they were willing to risk life for Bella.

One day, Alana betted, they would dispose of her body without a compliant. Alana scoffed as she walked back towards the elevator. If Bella wasn't going to bathe the crime away, Alana surely was. Inside the elevator did she finally exhale. The headache brewed at her temples made her massage the delicate areas. Talk of bloody boxes and madmen was nothing but the latest gossip on the streets, even for Malkavian standards. Alana wouldn't breathe life into the rumors of madmen and doomsayers.

She just wanted a hot bath and a good fuck.

She made it down into their private loft and kicked off her bloodied heels. They scattered somewhere in the living room, but Alana cared little. She stripped away from her bloodied clothes in the foyer and as she turned around to close the door behind her, she was met with the lights coming on their own. She spun around and found someone *unlikely* sitting their ass on her island counter. She didn't cover her indecency, rather, she stood with her hands on her hips.

“Well, well, didn’t know I was getting a movie and a show.”, the man sat upon the counter greeted. “You never not impress me, ‘lana.”

“*Matthew*…”, Alana gritted. “and let me guess, you brought *her* with you too?”

The Anarch got off the island counter and shook his head. He stepped into the living room with his hands in his pockets. He looked as coquettish as Alana remembered him.

"No, just me tonight.”, the Anarch beamed He flicked up a cigarette and held it between his lips. “I can smoke in here, yeah?”

Alana rolled her eyes and left Matthew to stand in the living room. She wanted her hot bath, and he definitely wasn’t the lay she was looking for. The Anarch watched her ascend the stairs, and Alana made sure to slam the bathroom door behind her. As the loft wasn’t strictly her *elysium*, she could care less about Matthew’s intrusion, but she didn’t need the Anarch as her peeping tom either.

She ran the faucet above the gilded tub and watched as the water began to pool. A quick succession of knocks on her bathroom door alerted to her that the Anarch did in fact, follow her upstairs. He at least had the decency not to barge in – although Alana wouldn’t have given him the favor. He kept the crescendo of knocks at the door till she grew tired of it and wretched the door open. Matthew stood there coyishly with his cigarette still unlit between his lips.

“You didn’t answer my question.”, he pointed towards the cigarette. “And also I need to talk to you.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”, Alana said in disgust. “Light your fucking cigarette and get the fuck out my place.”

As she was about to slam the door once again in his face, Matthew caught it midway. Alana huffed, but Matthew was not going to let up on the door. His boyish charm turned serious and Alana could see the shift in his stance. She let go of the door just as Matthew came into the bathroom and took his perch on the bathroom counter. The tub was half full so Alana decided to already sit inside the heated water. The blood stained onto her skin slid off her body like it was slickened oil. Matthew kept his eyes away from her nudity as he smoked. As much as a boy scout the Anarch he made himself to be, Alana knew better than to believe that façade. She crossed her arms across her chest just as the water started to get high enough to cover her bosom.

“I heard what happened upstairs.”, Matthew confessed. He dipped the curling ash of his cigarette into the sink. “She’s going to kill you one of these nights.”

“You don’t know that.”, Alana argued. “Why are you even here to begin with?”

Matthew shrugged his shoulders. He looked over to Alana and she saw how his eyes softened when he looked at her. It was the same kind of softness Bella once held for her, almost borderline pity, and Alana loathed it. She reached out to stop the faucet and sat back in the tub. Yet, the Anarch wasn’t wrong. Eventually, Bella was going to kill her – she already said

it time and time again that she didn't care much for Alana's well-being. She did it to keep up the image of course; the responsible Baroness and her forlorn junkie of a childe. It made a great feel-good story, but Alana never once felt good in their story. The female vampire sunk herself into the water a bit.

The Anarch was confirmed in his theory.

"I'm glad you know your worth.", he continued. "I just need to talk to you."

"Wish I figured that out sooner before hooking up with you.", she replied flatly.

"Are you just going to insult me or are you going to let me talk?"

"You're already talking.", Alana kicked her legs up over the side of the tub. The red-tinted water dripped onto the tile as Alana lounged, looking at Matthew with cynicism underneath her lashes. "You're *always* talking."

"Funny.", the Anarch flicked another tendril of ash into the sink. "I'm being serious, 'lana."

"Fine."

"Streets are talkin' about a cursed box.", Matthew mentioned. "Camarilla trying to keep it under wraps."

Alana pretended she didn't hear him. She grabbed her washcloth and began to scrub away the red off her skin. Matthew watched in silence just as his cigarette was extinguished and flicked into a nearby wastebin.

"What makes you think I know anything?", Alana raised up one of her legs and continued to bathe. "I'm too much of a drunk slut to know anything according to a certain *someone*."

Matthew sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Look, I didn't mean to say that shit before.", Matthew defended. "I was reckless back then…"

"And you still are, *Anarch*.", Alana interrupted. "But no, I don't know of any cursed boxes and I don't *want* to know about them, ok?"

"Right, well…", the Anarch rolled his head to his side and Alana could hear his tensed-up joints crackle. "Thought you *Malks* had an idea what's inside."

Alana rolled her eyes. There was only a selected few that knew of Alana, and retrospectively, Bella's true clan affliction. They blended in well into Toreador society, mimicked their poised mannerisms, often going undetected to most. But, Alana didn't get the foresight Malkavians were known to have. Rather, her extensive abuse of liquor and drugs dulled out her foresight. She played dumb to the suggestion, but Matthew caught on that Alana wasn't interested in the conversation.

“Is there a point to this?”, Alana straightened in the bath. “Or are you going to be a pervert and watch me take a bath?”

“Yeah, actually.”, Matthew grinned. “You know if the Prince is covering up this shitshow, its very fucking important.”

Alana nodded though she still didn’t grasp what the Anarch was playing at. Talk about cursed boxes and politics wasn’t in her repertoire. She did remember Bella’s rambles of such a box, but didn’t want to breathe light into anymore of that breed of craziness.

“And if we can get Will into the loop-“, the Anarch was cut off by Alana suddenly standing up in the tub. She glared at Matthew as if he had insulted her. The Anarch cleared his throat and slid his backside off the bathroom counter. He gave Alana a cautious look.

“Was it something I said?”

“Don’t you dare use that kid as a fucking gambling piece.”, she huffed. She stood outside the tub just as Matthew stood nearest to the door. His eyes pricked down towards his eyes and he frowned. He shoved his hands in his pockets and there was an unaired challenge wafting in the air.

Alana approached the Anarch, who by all means, would’ve welcomed the tussle, but instead, she balled up his ridiculously flamboyant shirt into her fist and held tight. Matthew’s eyes traveled down to where her fist held his shirt and beamed a cheeky grin.

“So you do know about it.”, Matthew accused. “And here I thought I was being crazy.”

“So what if I do? That shit has nothing to do with that man.”, Alana felt her teeth grit together.

“I struck a nerve.”, he gloated. “You got a thing for the kid?”

“I thought you liked them older and more of the decrepit side, if you catch my drift.”

“You fucking suck, you know that right?”, Alana spat.

“Hey – I’m not the one fucking *Nosferatu*, am I?”, the Anarch further insulted. “Again, you like Will? He’s a bit too young, but hey, what do I know?”

Alana didn’t, not really, perhaps just a bit of an attachment, but she wouldn’t tell that to Matthew. Will was a special case of Malkavian – the kind only around once in a generation, and God, she wasn’t going to allow him to be exploited. His wings were of wax and he was led so far from the ground, Alana was sure hew as going to sizzle in the sun by the likes of Matthew, and others like him. She fumed the longer she held his shirt hostage.

“If something ever happens to him, I’ll kill you myself.”, she warned scornfully.

“You shouldn’t threaten me, *babe*.”, Matthew pointed out. “After all, we wouldn’t want anyone to catch wind of that clusterfuck upstairs, wouldn’t we?”

“Are you trying to blackmail us?”, Alana pulled Matthew even tighter which made the Anarch chortle. “You’re an asshole.”

“I’m pretty sure slicing up your business associates isn’t legal.”, the Anarch joked. “After all, we *all* follow the Traditions.”

The Anarch was right – Bella broke the *Tradition* of destruction. She was not an Elder, or did she have just cause for the terror she caused downstairs. Alana bit the inside of her cheek then loosened the grip off the Anarch. Ultimately, Bella was a murderer, and as her childe, Alana shared the blame. He had her in a dilemma – Bella was her sire, and Alana wouldn’t betray her in a thousand years, but she was wrong for that massacre, even if it happened in a fit of madness.

She stood back and Matthew took the opportunity to readjust his shirt. He sighed then took his hands out his pocket. He opened the bathroom door and let himself out.

“Look, ‘lana.”, the Anarch offered. “Things are getting scary out there and I’m trying to do my due diligence and give you a heads-up.”

“When shit hits the fan, won’t you be glad you’d know what direction it’d fly in?”

“Sure, just like you gave me a heads-up when Bella was beating the absolute dogshit out of me.”, Alana remembered Matthew’s inaction when she came to the Anarchs for help after Bella nearly gave her a final death. “Or maybe the dozen other times I begged you to fucking save me.”

“And I’m fucking sorry for that.”, Matthew tried to defend himself. “I was the big bad asshole on the block that didn’t give a fuck about anyone *but* my own.”

“Look at you taking accountability!”, Alana mocked gleefully. “I can’t believe an Anarch is actually taking some fucking accountability for shit *he* did!”

Matthew threw his hands up and began to walk away from the doorway. Alana stomped out the bathroom to follow him downstairs.

“Why are you always bringing up old shit, huh?”, Matthew huffed. “You broke up with ME, remember?”

Alana wouldn’t forget. She loved how destroyed Matthew was after she dumped him. It still brought her glee.

“Because you’re always getting me into shit I *never* want to be apart of! You always want someone to be a toy solider for you and shit.”, Alana was close on his heels by the time they got to the foot of the stairs.

“You cant just drag people into your bullshit, Matt!”

“Whether you like it or not, *Alana*. Will is going to get us closer to fucking over Hannibal.”, Matthew fumed as paced to the front door. “Starting with that box.”

“Does Brian know your fucking over that fledgling, huh?”, Alana stopped half way across the living room.

She looked over to the island counter and saw some remaining glasses still on the countertop. She grabbed the first two and flung them over in Matthew’s direction. The first one shattered against the wall, but the second one clocked Matthew’s back. He hissed and spun on his heels. His face was furious and as his fangs had already slipped free from his gums.

“I’m doing this for *us*.”, Matthew debated. “So what? I shouldn’t put the welfare of thousands of other vamps because of one *fucking* orphan of a fledgling?”

Alana scoffed. None of what happened to Will was his fault. He was caught up in the politics of an underground world.

“Really? That’s the road you want to take? Blame the victim?”, disapproved Alana. “So fucking typical of you.”

She threw another glass across the room, but it didn’t strike its intended target. Rather, Matthew craned his head over to allow the glass to shattered once again against the wall.

“At the end of the night, it’s *us* or the Camarilla.”, Matthew began to cross over the living room.

“So much for fucking solidarity, huh? You’re just a pussy ass punk playing activist.”

Alan didn’t register the hand around her neck, or did her head slamming back *hard* into the granite countertop, let alone feeling her entire back contort into a painful bend. Matthew had been lightninging fast in throwing her into the kitchen. Even in her nakedness, she didn’t realize how vulnerable she’d been. The Anarch was twice her age, thrice her physique, but there was a hidden strength that came with Brujah anger. As she picked herself off the tiled floor, Matthew had slid down to hold her against the fridge. His eyes were brightened with a fury not even Bella held against Alana.

“Matthew…”, she hissed. “I know you got more than that.”

Rather than indulge her in her taunt, Matthew wringed her free from his wrthful grasp. Instead, he punched a deep crater of a dent into the stainless fridge above them and he backed off. He nursed his fist and whispered something quiet to himself. Alana sniffled and caught the blood streaming from the back of her head with her fingers.

Attaboy. Her mind teased her with such a rush. She cackled a bit as she stood up on shaky les. Matthew threw a look over his shoulder than wasn’t entirely of anger, more so, out of regret. Alana had worse.

“That wasn’t supposed to happen.”, the Anarch admitted. “I *fucked* up.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Alana threw her disheveled hair over to the side as she paced the kitchen for a towel to press into her bleeding cranium. She found one and nursed the towel as the fabric became soaked

in her blood. Naturally, she wouldn't die from such trauma, but she didn't need to replicate the mess being cleaned upstairs. Contrary to what Matthew guilted himself over, Alana had been hurt worse. In fact, she smiled through the throbbing pain of her skull.

Matthew had grown upset and Alana walked up to him then hugged him from behind. The gesture startled the Anarch and he flinched. He looked at her from over his shoulder, perplexed, more than likely, petrified that she'd come to be so intimately close to her after he'd attacked her.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Alana?", he asked. "Seriously…"

A plethora of things. Being a Malkavian, for starters, and the drugs didn't make it any better. Or Alana was so starved for love that she'd rather take pain over being cherished. In her world, love and pain were the same thing. She shrugged and tightened her grip around Matthew's waist.

"A lot, but you're still my favorite ex-boyfriend.", she expressed and bit the shell of Matthew's ear.

"You're crazy…", Matthew sighed and he slid his fangs back into his gums. "I wish I never met you, really."

Her playful bite became harder and the Anarch grimaced.

"Careful what you ask for, *lover boy*.", and she turned him around to lay a kiss onto his lips.

"I don't like threats."

Chapter End Notes

I've been incredibly busy since the beginning of the year. What made it worse is that I got sick this July which had me on my ass for the most of the month. Combine that with the lack of motivation and working almost full-time, I'm so done. But enough about me, I finally finished this update.

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Ankaran sarcophagus make everyone go crazy? Malkavians go brrrrrr.

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Chilton and Bedelia's alliance (not really, more like blackmail) was more one-sided than I originally planned. Given that Bedelia has *beef* with Will (though no fault of his own, Hannibal is just an ass), I wouldn't entirely blame her for being upset. Fred is just trying his best to serve his employer, but at the same time him nearly getting mauled to death has blurred what he considers loyalty versus well-being.

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Hannibal finally admitted in the shortest of words and actions he'd agreed with Will's analysis of their relationship. Though the fledgling is an unreliable narrator (and character may I add), I think Hannibal is the most truthful when it comes to realizing what he wants. Though it's sick, Hannibal's obsession has plateud to the point I'd like to believe he's willing to risk the literal apocalypse if it meant he'd had a chance. Now the Ankaran sarcophagus wouldn't be opened by Hannibal's own hand (and I've implied that others would try to come and open it), but he meant if that reality happened -- he'd much rather would save Will (over Bedelia retrospectively) or sacrifice himself. Kinda an obtuse way of being chivalrous.

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Traditions are laws. Break a law, face the consequences. Though Alana is Bella's "sister" (her progeny really), it was her duty to report her to higher authorities. But she's had this misconstrued sense of love lately that's been clouding her judgement. First, her attachment to Will is surface-level given she feels kinship (and towards the end of the chapter, she felt some kind of duty) because of their Malkavian status. Second, her sire literally committed a mass murder and instead of running, she actually tries to ignore her actions? And yes, her and Matthew had a bit of a dating past which was also equally terrible for her as I've tried to imply Matthew wasn't the best of a boyfriend. He was selfish (and I'd argue still is) and didn't even have a bit of restraint once Alana called him out on it (proceeding to attack her in her home). In exploring Alana's place in Kindred compared to television, she's much more of a tragic character. I wish her the best.

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I've rambled enough. Survey and end notes as usual.

── End Notes ── 2020
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